



HILDA
of the
HIPPODROME

DOROTHY C. PAINE

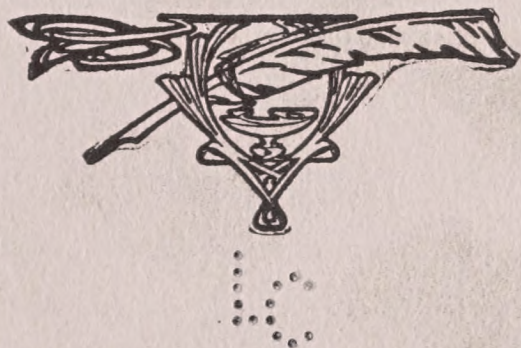
HILDA
OF THE HIPPODROME



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BY
DOROTHY CHARLOTTE PAINE

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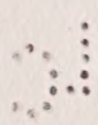
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HILDA OF THE HIPPODROME

CHAPTER I

HILDA SINGS



HE street was quaint and narrow. The little girl who was walking slowly down it, was even more unusual. At first glance she presented an elfish appearance, not because there was anything weird in her face or figure, for she was physically perfect, but she carried a baby in her arms, and one felt that, being so tiny, she should be protected instead of being the protector. She wore an old-fashioned bodice, and a full, short skirt of red. These once were of substantial homespun, but they had seen much service. Many neat patches testified to this. Her sleeves, stockings and ker-

chief were of coarse but spotless white. The kerchief was folded primly about her neck. Her shoes were of heavy German make, but she wore a Normandy cap. Altogether her appearance made a charming combination of German and French.

Suddenly she paused. Just ahead she saw some tourists standing in front of a window where carved souvenirs were displayed.

"Annette," she cooed to the baby, "here 's our chance. You must n't let me be scared. I 've just got to do it."

Pressing her charge closer, she marched resolutely towards the tourists. Her heart beat faster, though, and within a few yards of them, she again paused.

"I should learn by this time not to be frightened. People are so good. They always give us money," she reminded herself.

But she was not reassured. The baby, as if conscious of her nervousness, began to cry. Then the mother heart drove out fear.

"There, there, Annette. Sister will sing for thee," she cooed.

Patting the baby with one hand, she crooned a little French lullaby. Her singing was too low to attract notice, but the magic of her voice soon quieted Annette.

Again she glanced timidly at the tourists, who were not conscious of her presence. She was no longer afraid; she was only modestly uncertain of her ability.

“Dear God, please make them like my singing,” she prayed.

Without further wavering she started to repeat the French lullaby, her voice swelling out full and free.

With one accord the tourists looked around, and the hand-made work was forgotten.

The marvelous voice rang through the clear mountain air, attracting the attention of Mrs. Mortimer, a black-clad American lady. Once music had been the passion of her life, and so in the time of mourning she had fled alone to a foreign land hoping for consolation from some of the world's great artists. Thus far her quest had been in vain. Her heavy grief was not lightened. It was the more remarkable that the voice

of a little, unknown girl seemed as sunshine dispelling the shadows.

Interest and curiosity brought Mrs. Mortimer around the corner. For a moment, astonishment overmastered other feelings. It seemed incredible that this child could be the singer she sought.

“How can that wonderful tone come from that little frame?” she wondered. Pity was her next sensation. “She ’s nothing but a child herself. She should n’t be singing thus.”

Soon wonder and pity were forgotten in enjoyment. Being more familiar with French than German it was a pleasure merely to follow every word of the perfectly enunciated lullaby. Mrs. Mortimer’s enthusiasm did not stop at this. She compared the little singer to a Cinderella, the magic of whose voice completely transformed her. It was the raiment befitting royalty. It made its owner worthy to pass from the hut to the palace.

At the close of the lullaby, the girl smiled, with a pleading, wistful look that touched Mrs. Mortimer’s heart. It was a shock,

therefore, when the girl passed from person to person collecting small coins.

“One with a voice like that should n’t be a beggar,” said Mrs. Mortimer, and her interest waned.

This coldness was momentary. In gratitude for what had been so generously given the girl began another song. It confirmed Mrs. Mortimer in her belief that she had discovered a child genius, and when the singer started away, she followed, until they were alone except for Annette.

“Little girl,” she called in French, “I want to speak to you.” The child turned, curtesying demurely.

“Thank you very much, madame.”

“What is your name?”

“Hilda Walfels, madame”

She spake with so much dignity that Mrs. Mortimer feared that her interest might seem intrusive.

“Why do you sing on the street, Hilda?” she asked gently.

“To get money for food, gracious lady,” answered Hilda, but there was no whine as of a beggar in her tones.

“Are your parents living?”

“Yes, madame.” Hilda was sensitive, and she felt that Mrs. Mortimer disapproved. So she hastily added, “My father used to make lots of money before he was crippled. My mother is n’t very strong. She earns a little by sewing, but there are many of us to feed, and we have such big appetites. Sometimes when we have hardly anything in the house, I pray God not to make me so hungry.”

“Poor little girl, you ’re too young to have so much care.”

“Oh, madame, I ’m so glad I can help,” answered Hilda cheerily.

“Who taught you how to sing, Hilda?”

“Nobody, madame. Only my mother used to be a singer before she married my father, and she says my love of singing is from her.”

Hilda’s speech and manner did not accord with her size, and Mrs. Mortimer could not repress a smile.

“How old are you, Hilda?”

“Thirteen, madame.”

“Thirteen? Impossible. You look much younger.”

“No one believes I ’m as old as I am.”

The baby in Hilda’s arms began to whimper.

“I am afraid she ’s hungry. I must go home, madame.”

“Will you let me go with you? I want to see your mother.”

“The gracious lady will do us great honor by visiting us.”

The quaint politeness of Hilda; her friendliness, and her marvelous voice had completely captivated Mrs. Mortimer.

“I wish she were my child. With her voice, and the training I could give her, she would make a wonderful singer I know,” thought Mrs. Mortimer as she walked beside Hilda.

“There ’s where I live, madame,” Hilda announced as they turned the corner. The house to which she pointed was very old. In fact it was the most dilapidated and the smallest in the neighborhood. The stucco had peeled off leaving the old bricks in wrinkled view and the tiled roofing had

suffered from the ravages of time. Still the battered old house was more attractive than many of the others, partly because of its window boxes of flowers, their thriftiness bespeaking loving care.

“What pretty flowers you have, Hilda.”

Hilda nodded her head, well-pleased.

“Father and I love flowers. We grew many of them from slips, and I brought down some of the plants from the mountain side. Sometimes, madame, we have enough blooms to make nosegays to sell.”

“Come right in, madame,” and Hilda opened the door.

“Mother, mother, here ’s a lady come to see us,” she called

A care-worn little woman came from a back room.

“Mother, this lady speaks French. It will be pleasant for you to talk with her.”

Mrs. Mortimer observed Hilda’s protecting air. She spoke as if she were the older of the two.

A wonderful smile illumined Mrs. Walfels’ face. For a moment she looked young and pretty.

“Ah, madame, this is indeed a pleasure. Hilda knows what a delight it is to me to speak to anyone in my own tongue. I hate German. Please be so kind as to step into this room.”

As Mrs. Mortimer followed Mrs Walfels and Hilda, she had evidence of the poverty of which Hilda had spoken, but she also saw immaculate neatness on every side.

“I thought Annette was hungry, but she has fallen asleep,” said Hilda

“Take her to your father then. You ’d better stay with him.”

Hilda’s face fell. It was a deprivation not to be able to hear what the strange lady would say, but she was obedient, and had no thought of demurring. She curtsied to Mrs. Mortimer.

“I am so pleased to have met you, madame.”

“Hilda, I wish you would come to my hotel—The Goldener Adler—and see me. I get very lonely all by myself. Just ask for Mrs. John Mortimer. I shall love to see you any time.”

“Thank you, madame, I will surely come,” and Hilda departed.

“I hope, Madame Walfels,” Mrs. Mortimer began, as she accepted a seat beside her hostess, “that you will not consider my coming an intrusion, but—”

“Pray do not speak of it, madame, I am delighted.”

“After I heard your little girl sing, I was so charmed with her that I felt I must know more about her. So I questioned her, and asked her to bring me here. I want to do something for Hilda. She is too young to be sent out with a baby. It will give me great pleasure if you will let me help so that Hilda shall not have to beg on the streets.”

Mrs. Walfels drew herself up with unexpected dignity. “I do not call what Hilda does begging, madame. We artists do *not* look at singing in that light. I used to earn my living by my voice when I was a girl. True I sang in halls, and made more money than my Hilda does on the streets. But God knows I never gave as much as she does in return for what I got. She has a

far better voice than I ever dreamed of having."

"Hilda has a wonderful voice. She—" began Mrs. Mortimer, but Mrs. Walfels was so excited that she did not heed the interruption.

"Madame," she continued on the verge of tears, "if you gave her something for her singing, and do not feel that you had just returns, I pray you take your money back. Needy as we are, not one of us would want a single sou that did not justly belong to us."

It was Mrs. Mortimer's turn to feel humiliated.

"Pray forgive me. I see now that Hilda's singing on the street is not begging. Even while I called it that, I felt she was worthy of something so much better that I was unjust. She is unusually gifted. I consider her a genius. That is why I followed her here."

Tears streamed down Mrs. Walfels' wan cheeks. Mrs. Mortimer pressed the toil wrinkled hand nearest her.

"I am sorry I have hurt you. I do not

know what I can say or do to make atonement."

Mrs. Walfels smiled. "I 'm not crying because I 'm hurt, madame. The words you just said give me more joy than any I 've known since Hilda was born. You can never realize what it means to me to have an educated lady like you say that my Hilda has genius. I 've been saying it for years, and I 've stuck to it although I 've been laughed at for my faith. My husband never did have much of an opinion of singing—at least not to make money by. His great aim was to make Hilda an acrobat like himself."

"An acrobat!" repeated Mrs. Mortimer even more horrified than she had been at the idea of Hilda's begging.

"Yes, my husband was an acrobat. That 's how he was crippled. He fell from the bars. Before he used to make lots of money." Then half in extenuation and half in pride, added, "I saw you were shocked to think of Hilda's being an acrobat, but acrobats are not like what you believe. Before I met Fritz, I had a wrong

opinion of them myself, but, madame, they are good people. No one could have a better husband than my Fritz. He does n't agree with me about Hilda, and he thinks it 's the finest thing on earth to be a German, and I 'm always saying my country is the best, and so it is. But even when I get angry he 'll never quarrel. He 's the best man I ever knew. After he was hurt he learned wood-carving, but he can't make much at that. You can't expect him to do as well as people who 've been carving all their lives."

With her voluble French nature, Mrs. Walfels was glad of an opportunity to talk. She hardly drew breath between sentences, and Mrs. Mortimer was content to listen.

"But to go back to Hilda. If it had n't been for her having a wonderful voice, I 'd have liked to have her an acrobat. It does seem as if she were fitted for that almost as well as for singing. Just see how small she is, and beautifully formed, and so strong. From the time she could walk, Fritz began training her. You ought to see the things she can do. Fritz says she 's

a prodigy. He thinks she 'd make a fortune for us if she were on the stage."

"There are greater things in the world than money," interrupted Mrs. Mortimer. "Hilda ought to be a singer. No matter what other ability she has, her voice should be considered first. It would be wicked not to cultivate it."

Mrs. Walfels' face beamed. "Fritz ought to hear you talk. I wanted Hilda to be a singer so much that when Fritz was hurt it seemed almost providential."

Mrs. Walfels looked appealingly at Mrs. Mortimer, and added hastily, "You know I don't mean by that that I was glad that he was crippled. I was awful sorry, even before I realized what a terrible change it would make for us. But I thought, 'now perhaps Hilda can be a singer!'"

Mrs. Walfels sighed and shook her head, "Perhaps I was wicked, and am being punished for it. I 've seen since then that Hilda is no nearer being what I want than she was before. We never can do much for her while we 're so poor."

She brushed a tear from her eye. "I

don't mean to complain, madame. Even when I was saddest I did the best I could by Hilda. She speaks French like a Parisian, and my knowledge of music has been some help to her. Then, too, I made up my mind years ago to leave Hilda's future with God. He gave her her voice, and if He intends that she shall be a singer, He will make her one no matter what happens."

Mrs. Mortimer hardly knew what answer she could make. Thus far she had acted on impulse. Before making any serious move, she wished to consider matters calmly.

She held out her hand to Mrs. Walfels. "I hope you will consider me a friend," she said. Then she glanced at the old fashioned clock, and immediately rose.

"It is later than I thought. I must be going, but I will come and talk with you again about Hilda. I do think her voice marvelous. Possibly I can do something for her."

"God bless you, madame. You put new hope into my heart."

Mrs. Walfels hurried toward the kitchen,

and as she went, she hummed an air she had sung in her girlhood days.

“Why, mother is singing,” cried Hilda in happy surprise to her father.

Big Fritz, once so strong and agile, was seated in his usual chair by the window. Accident had crippled his body but not his spirit. He smiled brightly at his wife, and his hands did not cease from work on the rude cross which he was fashioning.

“Ach! but I ’m glad to see you so happy. Hilda told me about your lady visitor. She has done you good. It brings a breath of summer joy into the room to hear you sing.”

“How long since you have cared for singing, Fritz?” demanded his wife in surprise.

“I always liked to hear the housefrau sing about her work. I never quarreled with singing then.”

“Then why do you say Hilda should n’t be a singer?”

Big Fritz put his muscular hand on Hilda’s dark head, but his touch was very gentle.

“She ’d need years of training, and then she ’d have to go away.”

“Well, if she were an acrobat, she ’d have to leave us just the same,” interrupted his wife.

“Yes, but she ’d soon be making money for us, and we can’t get along without her help. Hilda ’s our mainstay.”

“That ’s true,” agreed his wife with a sigh. Her air castle that had risen so high a moment before, now seemed a ruin.

If Hilda had not been cheerful and brave like her father, she , too, would have sighed. She was more ambitious to be a singer than an acrobat. Still she would not repine. She intended to do her duty bravely no matter what came to her in life.

CHAPTER II

IS IT A FAIRY TALE?



THE next morning when Mrs. Mortimer came from the hotel, she was both surprised and pleased to find Hilda just outside the door.

"I was beginning to fear you 'd not come this morning, gracious lady," Hilda murmured.

"Why did n't you go inside and ask for me?" said Mrs. Mortimer.

"I—I—that would have been too bold, madame. I just wanted to give these to you," and Hilda shyly held out a bunch of freshly picked flowers.

"How lovely they are," Mrs. Mortimer exclaimed as she took them. Then she drew a coin from her purse. "I remember you said you sold nosegays. I am glad you brought one for me to buy."

"I — I can't take money from you,



madame," cried Hilda in dismay. "The flowers are the only way I have of thanking you."

"Of thanking me?" Mrs. Mortimer repeated.

"Why, yes, madame. You made my mother happy. After you left, she sang. She had n't done that before for years. So I picked the flowers after breakfast for you, "but she did not say that she had been watching for Mrs. Mortimer since six o'clock."

Mrs. Mortimer no longer insisted on Hilda's accepting pay. She felt that again she had blundered in regard to money matters. Instead she drew Hilda to her and kissed her.

"I really have n't done anything for you yet, dear little Hilda, but it 's very sweet your bringing me the flowers. I appreciate them very much. I was starting for a walk, and I wish you would come with me."

Hilda's expression showed her longing, even while she shook her head resolutely.

"I 'd love to go, madame, but I have n't sung at all this morning."

“How much will you earn if you don’t go with me, Hilda?”

A business-like look came into Hilda’s eyes.

“Well you see, madame, the mornings are not as good as the afternoons. Many of the tourists take trips up the mountains, and unless there are tourists about, I can’t make money.”

Mrs. Mortimer smiled. “Well, Hilda, I am a tourist, and I will give you as much as you could possibly make, if you will go with me. Is it a bargain?”

Once more Hilda shook her head. “That would n’t be earning money, and neither father nor mother would like it.”

Mrs. Mortimer was beginning to realize the sturdy independence of the Walfels, and she admired them the more for it.

“Hilda, I ’ll wager that you know all the prettiest spots around this country. Is n’t that so?”

“Yes, madame, I know the country all about here.”

“Well, I often engage guides to show me new places. So if you will act as my guide

this morning, I will pay you five francs. What do you say now?"

Still Hilda hesitated. "I—I don't know."

"Is n't five francs enough?"

"It 's not that, madame, I seldom make more than two at the most in the morning. I 'm wondering if I could earn it honestly."

"I am sure of it. So lead on, little Miss Guide."

Hilda smiled. "Oh, it 's so much fun being Miss Guide, madame. I hope you 'll not be disappointed in me."

The child drew herself up with as much dignity as she could possibly command. She intended to do honor to the occasion.

"Madame," she said with flourish of her hand to the right, and in the tone and mannerism of a professional guide, "we always take strangers to our Cathedral. It is world-famed. In it are—"

"Oh Hilda, spare me," cried Mrs. Mortimer, but this little bit of acting not only amused her, it disclosed more of Hilda's artistic ability.

"She is a good mimic. That will help

her if she ever has her voice developed," Mrs. Mortimer thought.

Hilda looked grieved. "Truly, madame, I know as much about the pictures and carvings as any of the guides. I 've followed them around often. I can repeat all their stories. Please don't be afraid to trust me."

"It 's not that, Hilda. I am tired to death of tourist sights. I want to go out into the country."

Again Hilda's professional spirit revived. "I know just what madame wants. I will take her up the mountain to the wonderful—"

"No Hilda, that will not do either. I just wish to take a little walk to some quiet place where the tourists do not go. Now do you understand?"

"Yes, madame," answered Hilda meekly. For a moment she looked pensive. It was hard to give up her preconceived idea of a guide's duty, but her desire to please conquered professional pride.

"I 've thought of the right place," she cried exultantly. "It 's a mile up the river.

The water rushes over big rocks—not a waterfall like that up on the mountain, but it 's very pretty and quiet there.”

“That is the very place for us, and just as far as I care to walk.”

“Hilda,” continued Mrs. Mortimer as they turned up one of the narrow side streets, “your mother was telling me yesterday about you. Would it make you happy to be a singer, as she wishes?”

“I love singing better than anything else in the world, madame,” and Hilda’s face was so radiant that Mrs. Mortimer read the longing of her soul.

“But supposing your father gets a place for you as an acrobat?”

Hilda’s smile vanished but she answered firmly, “I love my father, madame. He thinks I could make a lot of money that way, and I ’d be glad of the chance.”

Mrs. Mortimer realized again that Hilda was old for her age. She felt that she could talk to her as to a grown person, and that the little girl would reward any confidence with undertaking and sympathy.

“You are a good girl, Hilda, but you

must be a singer. If I were not leaving here the first of next week, I'd take you to Munich and have your voice tested."

"You are going away, madame?"

"Yes, dear, I must go back to my home."

"And where do you live, madame?"

"I have a country home in America—far away from here, across the ocean."

Hilda glanced shyly up at Mrs. Mortimer. The lady looked so sad that after a moment of hesitation, the child slipped her hand into that of her patroness.

"I shall miss you, madame."

Mrs. Mortimer's eyes were dim. "I am the one who will be lonely, Hilda. My husband is a busy man, so I see but little of him. My—my baby died just before I came abroad."

Hilda pressed her friend's hand tenderly.

"Oh, madame, I am so sorry, so very sorry."

Mrs. Mortimer was too deeply moved to answer. She walked on in silence, and Hilda knew that silence was best.

The idea of helping Hilda had taken a strong hold upon Mrs. Mortimer, but she

could not see how it was to be done unless she adopted the girl. There was a great obstacle to this course. Her husband was a morose man who disliked children. Even the loss which had left Mrs. Mortimer so forlorn, did not seem to grieve him.

“And what would he say if I brought a strange child home with me?” she asked herself.

They had reached the dark river on the outskirts of the town. Hilda looked timidly up, and she saw that Mrs. Mortimer was crying. She yearned to offer comfort but she did not see what she could say or do that would be of any help. So they walked on silently.

“I can’t sing to her as I do to Annette when she cries,” Hilda thought.

They came to a great rock and Mrs. Mortimer paused.

“I am tired,” she faltered. “I do not care to go any further.”

Hilda gazed at her wistfully. “I ’m afraid I ’ve been a poor guide, madame. Is n’t there something I can do for you?”

Her sympathy unstrung Mrs. Mortimer completely and she broke into sobs.

Hilda hesitated no longer and flinging her arms around the grieving mother she cried, "I am so sorry, madame, I do so want to help you. Is n't there something I can do, madame?"

Mrs. Mortimer dried her eyes.

"Sing for me, Hilda. That will comfort me."

"Really, madame? Oh, I shall love to sing for you."

"I must hear her again before I decide," was Mrs. Mortimer's thought.

But Hilda, happily unconscious of any ulterior motive, seated herself on the rock beside her friend. She clasped her hands in her lap, and looked up, smiling confidentially.

"I always have Annette with me when I sing. It seems so strange without her that I think I 'll have to make believe she 's in my arms. You don't mind, do you?"

Mrs. Mortimer shook her head. She could not trust herself to speak.

"She needs to be babied herself," she

thought, "instead of being always the mother."

"To-day by this river, madame, it seems as if I ought to sing in German. My father loves this land, and he has taught me many songs of the Fatherland. His native airs are the only ones he likes to hear me sing. Would the gracious lady be pleased to listen to some of these?"

"Yes, indeed, Hilda," said the gracious one, and thought, "I will not be listening to the words, and so I shall not let sentiment overrule my judgment of her voice."

At first Hilda, holding her arms as if a baby lay in them, sang a little German cradle song as softly and simply as when she soothed Annette to sleep.

Mrs. Mortimer was a little disappointed. She was tempted to ask Hilda to sing louder but she waited and her forbearance was rewarded.

Suddenly Hilda remembered for whom she was singing.

"Oh madame," she exclaimed contritely, "I forgot. Pray forgive me, but my make-believe seems so real that I never



once thought about you. There," she added moving her arms over as if she still held a baby in them, "I 'll place Annette beside us here. She 's asleep now, and so I can sing just for you."

Again Hilda clasped her hands in her lap. She gazed out over the quick flowing water. The next instant her voice swelled out full and free.

Mrs. Mortimer felt that the child was inspired, and it seemed as if the spirit of song had floated up from the river and was finding expression through Hilda.

"She is a genius, I must help her," vowed the listener.

"Hilda," she said aloud when the girl looked around to see if her singing had been of any comfort, "I wonder if you know that your voice is a gift from God?"

"Why, yes, madame, I know that for it often keeps us all from starving," answered Hilda, unconscious of the real significance of her friend's question.

"Sing me another song, Hilda."

Unhesitatingly Hilda obeyed. Mrs. Mortimer's heart melted more and more. Each moment her longing to keep the girl with her always grew more intense. The singing took her out of herself. She knew that she ought to speak to Hilda's parents before she did to their daughter, but she did not heed the voice of prudence, and at the close of the song she caught Hilda by the hands, and drew her close beside her.

“Hilda, how would you like to go to America?”

“Go to America, madame?” Hilda repeated in wide-eyed astonishment.

“Yes, Hilda, so that you could be a wonderful singer.”

Hilda's eyes grew rounder and rounder.

“Madame, do you really mean that I can be a great singer?”

“Yes, Hilda, I am sure of it.”

“Ah, madame, it 's too good to be true. It will make my mother so happy. But, no,” she added with a sigh, “it cannot be. I have no way of going to America.”

“But suppose I took you, Hilda?”

“You, madame?”

“Yes, I want you to be my little singing girl. You shall study in America until you have learned all you can there. Then we will come back to Europe for teaching of the masters. If you like my plan, kiss me, dear.”

Hilda threw her arms rapturously around Mrs. Mortimer, then drew back, for she remembered.

“I cannot go, madame. Father said only

yesterday that I am the mainstay of the family. I just must make money for them."

"I will leave enough money for them, Hilda."

This offer did not relieve Hilda's mind.

"They would n't take it, madame, and it does n't seem right even to me."

Mrs. Mortimer felt that she could reason with Hilda more easily than with Mrs. Walfels. So she drew her gently toward her and looked into her troubled eyes.

"My dear little girl, if you think best, I will advance the money as a loan."

"A loan?" repeated Hilda, frightened by the word.

"Yes, dear, and then when you begin to make money by your singing, you can pay me back."

"But, madame, supposing I never could pay you back?"

Mrs. Mortimer smiled. "If you come with me, you will surely succeed. You will have more money some day than you will know how to spend, and you will be able to keep all your family in luxury the rest of their days."

“Madame, are you telling me a fairy tale?” demanded Hilda breathlessly.

Mrs. Mortimer pressed the girl close to her heart.

“I believe it to be the truth, Hilda.”

“But if it were n’t, madame?” mused Hilda anxiously.

“Then you would have more than repaid me by being with me, dear. I am very lonely, and you have crept into my heart. You must be my little girl. So say you will go to America with me.”

“Madame, I cannot say it without asking my parents.”

“I know we can win their consent. It is as good as settled.”

And so it proved. Mrs. Mortimer overcame all obstacles. She made such generous allowance to Hilda’s family and was so confident of Hilda’s future that even big Fritz was content that the experiment be made.


“But, little Hilda,” he said in parting, “don’t forget what I have taught you. Keep in practice for my sake. If your voice does n’t become what Mrs. Mortimer

thinks it may, then you must be an acrobat. We 've taken her money as a loan, and remember, child, you are in honor bound to pay it back. So don't neglect your practice. Promise me not to forget."

"I promise, Father," Hilda answered solemnly.

CHAPTER III

AS NICE AS ANY BOY

NTIL the last day the passage across the Atlantic proved uneventful for Hilda. Stormy weather made the trip disagreeable for most of the passengers, but in spite of cold and fog, Hilda's spirits never flagged.

That last morning she came on deck humming in French a gay little air. As usual she was the first passenger astir. She glanced eagerly out to sea.

"Oh how nice," she thought. "The sun 's going to break through the clouds. Here we 've been out eight days instead of six, and it 's stormed every bit of the way. I 've loved it, but I do want one bright day."

The prospect of sunshine made her so happy that she could not keep still. So

away she skipped down the long deck. In a moment she caught her crimson skirt daintily in each hand, and in spite of the rolling of the boat she began to dance with extraordinary grace.

She seemed a veritable sprite lured from the sea by the sunbeams. Her raven hair floated loosely around a face bright with happiness.

“This is n’t exercising exactly as Father asked me to, but it will keep me from growing stiff,” she thought. “Maybe I could practice a little out here.”

She glanced back over her shoulder. Not even the deck steward was in sight. Without further hesitation, she sprang forward hands flat on the deck, and over and onward she flew. She turned three hand springs before she stopped. By this time she was nearing the step that led to the steerage, so she sprang lightly up on tip-toe, her breathing undisturbed.

The next instant she spied a poor little bird resting in utter dejection beside the landing.

“That ’s the same one I saw yesterday,”

thought Hilda. "The sailor said it was weak then. Poor little birdie, you do look tired to death. I must catch you, and give you some food."

She crept stealthily forward, reaching out with great caution, for she hoped thus to capture the weary bird. Her hand grazed its feathers, but just as she thought she had it surely, it fluttered out of her grasp and hopped down the steps.

"Birdie, I 'm your friend," Hilda called softly in French. "I would n't hurt you for the world. Let me catch you, and I 'll get you something to eat," and she continued the pursuit.

The bird misinterpreted her intentions. Frightened into renewed strength it trusted to its wings, flying upwards out of Hilda's reach. It had gone but a short way when again weakness overcame it. Had it not been for a nearby mast, it must have fluttered back to the deck below. As it was, it managed to light on some of the rigging on the mast.

With upraised face, Hilda stood a moment below the bird.

“Birdie,” she murmured, laughing softly, “you think you ’ve gotten the better of me, but you have n’t.”

Unhesitatingly she began to climb the mast, and proved as skillful as any sailor.

A boy who had appeared on the upper deck soon after Hilda, chanced to look in the direction of the mast. He thought his sight must be playing him tricks. He hastened to make sure.

“It is a girl.” Then he called aloud in Italian. “You ’d better come down. You ’ll get hurt.”

Either Hilda did not hear or she would not heed. All the time the boy was running toward her.

When he reached the mast, Hilda had the bird in hand ready to descend.

“Wait and I ’ll help you,” cried the boy in Italian, and with the words, was climbing the mast, fearful for her safety.

Hilda clinging to the rigging, paused irresolutely.

“I don’t understand you,” she answered.

“I was afraid you ’d get hurt so I



thought I 'd better help," he called in French, since she had spoken in that tongue.

Hilda smiled down at him reassuringly. "I don't need any help—truly I don't. If you 'll only get out of my way, I 'll be all right."

"Get out of the way indeed, and she a mere girl," thought the boy, but she seemed so confident of herself that he did as she asked. Hardly had he made a landing before she was standing beside him.

"I got the bird all right. See," she exclaimed, holding it toward him.

"You don't mean you risked your life just to get that?"

Hilda laughed. "I did n't risk my life. I know how to climb. Now I must get some bread for the poor, starved little thing. You see it 's very young, and it 's been following the boat several days, and it must be awfully tired and hungry."

"You wait here, and I 'll bring some bread back to you," the boy offered, and was gone before Hilda could say a word.

For awhile she devoted her attention to

the bird which was still trembling with fright. Soon it saw that she meant no harm and nestled in her hand, quite calm. Hilda's thoughts reverted to the boy.

"My, but he was frightened about me! The idea of his wanting to help me. Me!"

She laughed and laughed until she saw the boy returning.

"He 'll think me impolite," and she tried to still her mirth. But as he rejoined her the absurdity of the situation struck her afresh. Again she laughed outright.

His look of surprise quieted her.

"I could n't help it. Your coming up that mast to help me was so funny!"

"How, funny?" demanded the boy, half inclined to be offended.

"Because I 'll wager that I was much safer than you. You see my father was an acrobat, and—"

"An acrobat! That 's funny, I 'm an acrobat myself."

It was Hilda's turn to be surprised. Without having seen many acrobats she had pictured them very unlike this boy. The difference was indefinable. She simply

felt that his whole bearing was above the vocation he claimed. A more seasoned observer would have said that it was not so much because he was handsome, although his luxuriant hair and his limpid brown eyes would have made him conspicuous anywhere, but because all his features denoted an artistic nature.

“You, an acrobat?” she repeated.

The boy hung his head, as if he felt himself guilty of some crime.

“I did n’t want to be one. My father made me one. Here ’s the bread,” he added, wishing to draw her attention from himself.

“Do you suppose the bird will eat from our hands? Now that I ’ve got it, I don’t know what to do with it. I wish I had a cage for it.”

“I ’ve a box in my room that might do until we reach shore. Then you can get a cage.”

“I ’ll not need it there. I ’m not going to keep the bird.”

Everything Hilda did or said was a surprise. The boy eyed her incredulously.

“You don’t mean that you went to all the trouble of catching that bird just to let it go?”

“Why of course. It would have died if I had n’t, but I ’d not keep a wild bird caged for anything. I ’ll be so glad if you ’ll get that box to put it in until it ’s strong enough to fly away.”

Once more the boy hurried away. In a short time he was back again with the box. Placing it on the hatch near them, he made holes in the cover while she crumbled up the bread. Then the bird was safely transferred from Hilda’s hand to the box.

“That ’s fine!” exclaimed Hilda, sitting down on the hatch and peeking through the holes in the box. “Birdie ’s eating, too.”

The boy seated himself on the other side of the box.

“I noticed you the first day we came aboard. You ’re so dark I thought perhaps you were an Italian.”

“You ’re one, are n’t you? How do you speak French so well?”

“Oh, I know several languages. It ’s

convenient to speak different ones traveling all over the world as we do. Father had sister and me study languages from the time we were very little. But tell me more about your climbing. You were wonderful! But you 'd better not let my father know about you or he 'd kidnap you. He 's been looking for a girl like you for years. If you ever should want a position, you just come along with us!"

Hilda smiled. "Thank you. I don't believe I 'll ever be an acrobat."

"Well, if you change your mind, send word to me. But I have n't told you my name. I 'm Silvio Rossi."

"And I 'm Hilda Walfels. I was christened Hildegarde, but no one ever calls me that. It 's funny in our family about our names. Father and mother took turns with us children so that we have first a German name and then a French. But I must be going. It 's time for my baby to wake."

"Your baby?" echoed Silvio, much puzzled.

Hilda nodded. "I 've borrowed one every day from a lady down in the steer-

age. I just love babies. After breakfast I 'm going to take this one up on the deck to show Mrs. Mortimer. Thank you for your help. Good bye."

She jumped up and started to skip away, then turned hastily back.

"I almost forgot the bird."

"I 'd have looked after it."

"That 's kind of you. Well, good bye again."


"I 'll see you before we land," answered Silvio.

As he watched the crimson-clad figure hurrying away, he thought:

"I 'd like to know her better. She 's fine. She 's just as nice as any boy," and after a pause, "I should n't wonder if she 's nicer."

CHAPTER IV

THE GREATEST CONTRALTO

RS. MORTIMER looked up from her steamer chair to see and saw Hilda approaching with a baby in her arms. She observed that the two made a very pretty picture.

“She ’s the greatest little mother girl I ever knew,” she thought. Aloud she said, “Why, Hilda, what are you doing with that baby?”

“It ’s the one I told you about. I brought her up just to show her to you,” Hilda explained, seating herself on the edge of the vacant chair next to Mrs. Mortimer. “She ’s a dear even if she is a little dirty, isn’t she?”

The girl’s face was so happy that Mrs. Mortimer could not help smiling, although she hardly approved of Hilda’s sorties into

the steerage for babies. But she did not voice this thought, divining that Hilda greatly missed Annette.

"Oh, I love babies," confided Hilda, patting her charge gently. "I wish we could take this one home with us, don't you?"

"We 'll have to be satisfied with each other, Hilda," murmured the childless woman, her eyes filling. "Mr. Mortimer does not care for children, and so you cannot hunt up babies when we get home."

"Do you think Mr. Mortimer will like me?"

"I pray God that he may," and the answer was so earnest that it startled Hilda.

"She 's afraid he 'll not like me," she thought, and then she forgot herself in loving care for another. To suggest that the baby leave her arms even for a few moments meant a real sacrifice on her part, but she hoped it might prove comforting. So she lifted her little charge very gently toward Mrs. Mortimer.

"You can hold her," she said.

Involuntarily Mrs. Mortimer drew away. "I don't care to."

That her mission of love was a failure was a disappointment, and Hilda's face showed it. Mrs. Mortimer caught the expression and wished to atone for her curt-ness.

"Hilda," she said, "I have not told you how nicely I thought you helped with the packing. You were better than many a maid I have had. And I must thank you for waiting on me so thoughtfully during all this rough voyage. How did you learn to be so capable?"

"I 've always had to work," answered Hilda simply. "The things you let me do for you are nothing."

The baby moved restlessly. Hilda began singing a lullaby, and the little one was quiet.

"Hilda," Mrs. Mortimer resumed, "I 've decided that you and I shall stay over a few days in New York to have your voice tried. I must have the opinion of some master."

"I—I 'm not afraid to sing for you,"

stammered Hilda, looking frightened, "but I 'd be scared to death to sing for a really truly master. I 've never had any lessons, you know."

"Nonsense, child, with your voice you—"

At that instant the deck steward came up with beef tea and crackers.

"Well, steward, shall we surely be in to-day?" asked Mrs. Mortimer.

"There 's no doubt about it, ma'am. I was just telling Madame Von Arnim—the lady over there by the door—that we'd land before three anyway. She 's anxious because the boat 's more than two days overdue now, and she 's booked to sing at a concert to-morrow night."

"Madame Von Arnim?" repeated Mrs. Mortimer. "Not the great Madame Von Arnim!"

"Yes, that 's the one, ma'am."

Mrs. Mortimer turned to Hilda.

"You did n't understand what he said, did you? The great singer, Madame Von Arnim is on board."

"A great singer? I want to see her," cried Hilda excitedly.

“She ’s over there by the door. Madame Von Arnim is the most wonderful contralto in all the world.”

With her eager eyes Hilda glanced toward the door. She beheld a beautiful lady with quantities of golden hair.

“She ’s the great singer! She is surely Madame Von Arnim,” Hilda said to herself, and never had she been so enchanted.

Her most cherished dream was that some time she might meet a great singer. This lady of her dream was always wonderfully beautiful, but never had the vision made her half so lovely as was the golden-haired lady.

“Yes, she is surely Madame Von Arnim,” she repeated.

Not to be mistaken, she looked toward the far side of the doorway. Merely a nice, motherly lady was seated there.

“She can’t be the great singer,” decided Hilda, not wasting a second glance on her. The little singer-worshipper had eyes now only for the golden-haired, angelic being.

“She looks just as she ought to,” she mused rapturously. Then her heart sank.

“I ’m dark, and I don’t believe I ’m pretty. If I ’m not, I can’t be a singer. People would n’t listen to me.”

Timidly she turned to Mrs. Mortimer.

“I—I ’m not a bit pretty, am I, Mrs. Mortimer?”

It was the first time that Hilda had betrayed an interest in her own looks, and Mrs. Mortimer did not believe in encouraging any vanity.

“No one would ever call you pretty,” she answered shortly, not thinking it necessary to add that sometimes when Hilda was most animated she considered her beautiful.

“I knew I was n’t pretty,” thought Hilda with a deep sigh. She felt rebellious. “Mrs. Mortimer says God gave me my voice. He ought to have made me pretty then.”

At this moment the baby began to cry. Hilda sprang to her feet.

“I ’ve been spoiling her,” she said. “She wants me to walk awhile with her,” and away she went to the forward end of the deck soothing her charge gently. Her

touch and her tone proved magical. Soon the crying ceased, and from a pucker, the rosebud mouth curved to a smile. Hilda retraced her steps intending to walk to the other end of the boat.

Opposite the door, however, the motherly lady stopped her.

"Little girl," she said, smiling in a friendly way, "you 're too small to carry that baby. Sit down beside me."

"I do not speak much English," answered Hilda.

"Perhaps then you know my language," said the lady in German.

"Oh yes, I speak German."

"That is good. I love the babies, too. I have a house full of my own at home. Sit down there, *meine liebbling*."

"*Meine liebbling*," murmured Hilda, accepting the proffered seat. "Oh, Madame," she added, "that sounded so good. You called me '*meine liebbling*' just like my father."

Again the baby began to cry. Hilda deftly straightened out its clothes as only a very experienced person can. Then she

held it closely in her arms, and swaying back and forth, she tried to sing it to sleep.

The motherly lady stared in surprise.

“What a wonderful voice,” she thought, “I must know more about this child.”

“But, no,” she said to herself, “she seems a shy little bird, and my interest would startle her into silence,” so she forbore to speak, listening intently.

Hilda’s lullaby quieted the baby all too soon to suit the motherly lady.

“Don’t stop, lieblich,” she said, leaning forward with beaming face. “I like the way you sing.” To herself she was even more enthusiastic. “Himmell! but the dear child’s voice is a surprise.”

At that moment Hilda looked up and met the gaze of the golden-haired divinity who seemed interested. The young girl blushed to the roots of her hair.

“Well, well, why don’t you sing?” asked Hilda’s new acquaintance.

Hilda’s voice did not come back to her until the motherly lady had repeated her question.

“Oh, I can’t sing. *She* would hear me.”

“She? Who?”

“The great contralto, Madame Von Arnim,” whispered Hilda impressively.

Her awestruck tone made the lady beside her laugh until her sides shook.

“Ach, but the critics should hear you!” she said. “If you went to them with your big, round eyes and said”—here the lady cleverly mimicked Hilda’s expression and tone—“‘The great contralto, Madame Von Arnim,’ they would surely believe Madame Von Arnim the most wonderful singer in the world.”

“Don’t, please don’t,” begged Hilda. “She ’ll hear you.”

“Who will hear me?”

“Madame Von Arnim,” whispered Hilda. “She is that beautiful, beautiful lady in the next seat there.”

“Is that so? Madame Von Arnim is a ‘beautiful, beautiful lady’ is she?” repeated her companion dryly. “No doubt she ’d like to be told that. Well, well, I believe she ’d like to hear you too. She ’d

not be a bit critical with you. I know her, and—”

“You know her?” repeated Hilda in wide-eyed envy. Then she demanded breathlessly, “Have you heard her sing?”

Once more the motherly lady was amused. A merry twinkle shone in her friendly eyes. “Ach yes, whenever I want Madame Von Arnim to sing, she has to sing for me.”

“If you asked her now, would she sing?” asked Hilda, her cheeks flaming.

“Did n’t I tell you she ’d have to sing if I said so?”

Hilda sprang to her feet somewhat forgetful of the baby. It stirred restlessly.

“Hush, hush,” cried Hilda, impatient of any interruption. Then she turned her sparkling, pleading eyes toward the motherly lady.

“Madame, please, please, please ask her to sing.”

Her excitement made her so attractive that the motherly lady had not the heart to refuse her outright.

“Now child! *Why* should I ask her?”

“I ’d give anything to hear her. I love singing better than anything else in the world, and I ’ve never head a great singer,” pleaded Hilda, all her soul in her glowing eyes. “I can’t tell you how happy I shall be if you will only ask Madame Von Arnim to sing. You will ask her, won’t you?”

The motherly lady realized that delay was making the inevitable refusal more difficult.

“No, no, child, it ’s not best for her to sing to-day.”

The tears sprang to Hilda’s eyes. Her disappointment was so apparent that the tender heart of the motherly lady was moved.

“Sit down again, meine liebbling. Maybe I can arrange it so that you can hear her.”

Hilda’s face was radiant.

“You arrange it?” she gasped, reseating herself. “How can you?”

“Did n’t I tell you I ’m the best friend Madame Von Arnim has?”

“But I ’ve never once seen you talking to her.”

The motherly lady enjoyed the child's doubts. "Ach, but we don't have to talk. We know each other so well that we never say a word to each other."

"Then if you don't tell her about me, how can I ever hear her?"

"Are you to be in New York to-morrow night?"

"Yes, we 're to stay there a few days. Mrs. Mortimer said so."

"Who 's Mrs. Mortimer?"

"She is the lady who is adopting me. There she is over there—the lady in black."

"I 'll ask her if you may go," said Hilda's new friend, rising with decision.

"Go where?" demanded Hilda also rising.

"To Madame Von Arnim's concert to-morrow night."

"I—I go? Oh, if I only might."

"Well, wait here. I 'll speak to Mrs. Mortimer."

Hilda felt like a prisoner awaiting sentence of life or death. With breathless interest she watched the motherly lady walk over to Mrs. Mortimer and say something.

As a rule Mrs. Mortimer was reserved, but to Hilda's relief and delight, she unbended now, smiling graciously and motioning the lady to sit beside her. Soon the two were talking in a most cordial manner.

"Oh, if I only knew what they are saying," thought Hilda.

At that moment the motherly lady was saying:

"Hilda tells me that you intend to adopt her."

"I want to do so, but I have not consulted my husband yet. In any event I shall give Hilda her chance. Please tell me what you think of her voice."

The motherly lady's expression betrayed approval, but her answer was non-committal.

"Bring Hilda to the concert, and afterward I will see you both and tell you what I think. I will have seats at the box office for you. Will you come?"

"Indeed I will," answered Mrs. Mortimer warmly. "It is a most wonderful opportunity. We never can thank you enough."

“Now I ’m going to have the pleasure of telling Hilda,” said the lady rising. “Her face is so expressive that watching her joy will more than repay me.”

Hilda ran more than half-way to meet her. She read the wonderful news in the lady’s eyes.

“Oh, I ’m to go. I ’m to go,” she cried, and if it had not been for the baby she would have hugged her benefactress, who seemed a veritable fairy god-mother to the excited mind of the girl.

“You ’re so good that I just love you. I don’t know how to thank you. It ’s the loveliest thing that ever was. I—”

“Wait until after the concert to thank me I ’ve arranged with Mrs. Mortimer to see you then.”

“Hilda,” called Mrs. Mortimer, “you must n’t bother Madame?”

The lady placed a warning finger on her lips, and hurriedly walked over to Mrs. Mortimer.

“I don’t want her to know who I am until the concert,” she whispered.

So Mrs. Mortimer simply added, "It 's time for you to take the baby back, Hilda."

To tear herself away from her new friend was hard, but Hilda obeyed.

All the rest of that morning her happiness was so intense that she felt as if she could fly. She gave vent to some of her delight in joyous song. But upon her return she saw no more of the motherly lady, who had gone to her stateroom for a rest.

After luncheon, when they were steaming into the harbor, Silvio had a few last words with Hilda. He came up to her just as she had taken the box with the bird to the side of the boat.

"I 'm going to let it go now," she said. "It 's much stronger and it will be happy to reach land." Then she opened the box, and away flew her captive, winging its flight joyfully toward shore.

"Where are you to live in America?" Silvio asked.

"Near Cleveland. Mrs. Mortimer has a country home just outside the city."

"I think we 're booked for the Cleveland Hippedrome this winter. If we are



I 'll send you some tickets—only I must have your address.”

“How nice! I 'll get Mrs. Mortimer to write our address down for you,” and Hilda flew back to her patroness.

“I met a boy this morning—Silvio Rossi. He 's an acrobat, and he 's to be at the Cleveland Hippodrome this winter. He wants our address so that he can send us some tickets. Is n't that just fine?”

Mrs. Mortimer raised her eyebrows slightly.

“My dear Hilda,” she answered, “you must learn better. I do not approve of your speaking to strange boys this way.”

“But he 's a very, very nice boy.”

“That is not the question. Now that you are with me, you must conform to my ideas.”

“But may n't I give him our address? I promised it to him.”

“No, Hilda. You must stay here beside me now.”

Hilda was too obedient to demur further, but she feared Silvio would think her un-

friendly for not returning. She tried to catch his eye to smile at him, but he did not once look her way, and Hilda was sad. She liked Silvio, and she wanted him to like her.

CHAPTER V

“GIRLS’ DRESSES FIRST”



ON the afternoon of the concert, Mrs. Mortimer took Hilda shopping. They went to a beautiful store with the most gorgeous show-windows, the mere sight of which was a marvel to Hilda, who was unused to cities.

“Can I show you anything, madame?” asked the floor walker as they entered.

“I will look at girls’ dresses first.”

“This way please,” and he conducted them to the side of the store.

Here Hilda saw an opening in the wall inside of which was a very queer cage. Much to her surprise Mrs. Mortimer stepped into the cage. Hilda held back.

“Come, Hilda,” said Mrs. Mortimer.

The next moment Hilda was inside the cage also, not knowing what to expect.

Suddenly they shot up and up. Hilda was too surprised to utter a sound. Then, too, it took her breath away. Still she rather enjoyed her novel ride.

"We get off here," said Mrs. Mortimer at the third floor.

A saleswoman brought out for their inspection a number of dainty white dresses, and Hilda was taken to a little room to try them on.

Mrs. Mortimer selected the one Hilda thought the most beautiful. It fitted her perfectly, and she felt like a fairy princess in it but she was too bashful to express her joy before the saleswoman.

"I want it sent over surely this afternoon. She is to wear it this evening," said Mrs. Mortimer giving the necessary directions.

Next they went to the millinery department where a French woman took unusual pains to please Mrs. Mortimer and Hilda because they spoke to her in her native tongue.

She finally placed a quaintly shaped white straw trimmed with French flowers,

on Hilda's head. Then she gave it a twist here, and a poke there.

"Ah, Madame," she said with a satisfied sigh, clasping her hands and standing a little to one side, "that hat must have been made for this very little girl. Is it not beautiful? I think it perfect."

Much to Hilda's delight Mrs. Mortimer approved of the hat and ordered it sent to the hotel.

The finery that was bought for Hilda that afternoon almost turned her head. Never had she expected to possess so rich a wardrobe. Nothing was forgotten; everything was in harmony even to white shoes, and a coat which was needed because there was an autumn chill in the evening air.

It was late when they left the store. As Mrs. Mortimer had two more errands to do she called a cab.

"Drive us to Tiffany's," she said.

At the jeweler's she bought a pearl locket and gold chain. Hilda wondered for whom this purchase was meant, but she asked no questions, and Mrs. Mortimer vouchsafed no explanation.

It was growing dark. But there was one thing more Mrs. Mortimer was bent on doing before returning to the hotel.

"Drive us to the nearest florist's," she said to the cabman.

The city was just being lighted up. No fairy spectacle could have seemed more wonderful to Hilda and the brilliant illumination of Broadway deepened her conviction that she herself had become an enchanted princess.

"Hilda," said Mrs. Mortimer at the florist's, "I am going to let you select some roses to send Madame Von Arnim."

Hilda looked critically at the roses. At first she wavered between white and pink ones and was about deciding on the pink when she spied some long stemmed roses of a rich red hue. She no longer hesitated. The brilliant coloring of these had a meaning which both the white and pink lacked. The red to her not only expressed vivid admiration, but love, and flowers to be suitable for Madame Von Arnim must convey that sentiment. Hilda did not think it all out in words; she only felt it.

“Let ’s buy these for her,” she said, pointing to the red beauties.

“Very well,” agreed Mrs. Mortimer, and to herself added, “I wonder where she gets her perfect taste; perhaps it ’s the artistic temperament.”

On a card she sent with the flowers, Mrs. Mortimer wrote something that would have greatly surprised and pleased Hilda. These were the words: “With much love from Hilda to Madame Von Arnim.”

When the shoppers reached the hotel, they found all their packages awaiting them.

“We will dress before dinner,” said Mrs. Mortimer.

Afterward, when they were all ready, she drew Hilda into her arms and kissed her.

“This is a wonderful night for you, my dear,” she said, “and one that you must always remember.”

“I ’ll never, never forget,” murmured Hilda with a catch in her voice.

“I know you will not, but in the years to come this present will help you to keep it

in mind," and she slipped around Hilda's neck the chain with the pearl locket. ,

"It 's not really for me?" gasped Hilda.

"I bought it for you, dear."

To assure herself that the locket was really hanging around her neck Hilda touched it reverently, then flew into Mrs. Mortimer's arms and kissed her.

"Your locket opens," said Mrs. Mortimer, "so that you can have two pictures in it."

"Oh how lovely. I want yours."

"Yes, dear," and Mrs. Mortimer pressed the spring to show Hilda the inside of her gift.

Hilda wondered who would go on the opposite side. She thought of her baby sister, but did not see how she was to get a likeness of Annette.

"I am going to get you a picture for the other side, Hilda," said Mrs. Mortimer as if reading her thoughts.

"A picture? Whose?" asked Hilda.

"I would rather not tell you now, but you will know before long. You must not disappoint me to-night, Hilda."

“Disappoint her? What does she mean?” wondered Hilda, but did not puzzle her head long over the problem. She was so happy that she believed only good could fall to her lot.

“Fairy princesses never do anything wrong. So I just can’t disappoint her,” she decided.

CHAPTER VI

A WONDERFUL NIGHT



ARNEGIE Hall was well filled when Mrs. Mortimer and Hilda arrived. An usher escorted them to seats close to the stage.

“I ’m glad we ’re so near. We can see her better,” whispered Hilda.

“It is more important to hear well. We are a little too near for the best effect. But the house is so crowded that, by ourselves, I do not believe we could have gotten seats at all. Sometimes I enjoy music most when I just close my eyes and listen.”

Hilda thought that not for the world would she close her eyes, and that it would be almost as much of a delight to look at Madame Von Arnim as to hear her.

She was so excited that she could not keep still, and she looked eagerly all around the hall.

“Are n’t they too beautiful for anything?” she asked.

“Who?”

“The ladies in their light dresses. Oh, I ’m so glad we are here.”

Her gratitude made her thoughts revert to the motherly lady.

“She ’s so nice I love her even if she is n’t pretty. Looks only matter if one is a singer like Madame Von Arnim. Then they just must be beautiful, as she is.”

“Madame Von Arnim’s selections are admirable,” said Mrs. Mortimer who had been studying the program. “They are suited to display a contralto voice to the best advantage.”

“Does she have many songs, Mrs.—”

“Hush, they are about to begin.”

Hilda looked, expecting to see Madame Von Arnim. Instead, a gentleman appeared on the platform and bowed slightly. Then he sat at the grand piano and began to play.

“Where is she? Where is Madame Von Arnim?” whispered Hilda.

“Shh—she ’s fourth on the program.”

"I don't want to hear him. I want to hear her," Hilda thought.

But as the pianist warmed to his theme, she too awakened to the beauty of his playing. Presently she leaned slightly forward with hands clasped and eyes sparkling. Thus she sat during the long selection, all her restlessness overcome.

"Was n't that lovely!" she murmured, at the finale, and sank back into her seat with a sigh of content. "I never heard anything so beautiful as that in all my life."

"You prove that you appreciate good music, Hilda," said Mrs. Mortimer.

"Ah, if it weren't for Madame Von Arnim, I 'd love to listen to him all night!"

The second number also proved a delight to the musical girl. A queer looking little tenor by his flexible voice made her forget his appearance.

"He 's not good looking and yet *he* sings," she thought as he finished his encore. "It 's only women, maybe, who have to be beautiful. I know Madame Von Arnim will look even more beautiful at night," she added with a fresh thrill of anticipation.

“Mrs. Mortimer said she is fourth. What ’s next?” she wondered. Aloud she asked, “Is the man to play again?”

“No, a lady is to give a violin solo.”

Hilda’s impatience to behold her divinity was so great, that she felt no interest in a mere violin player.

A man walked across the stage and seated himself at the piano. Then Hilda’s heart stopped beating for a moment. The beautiful golden-haired lady she had seen on the boat stepped out on the platform.

“Mrs. Mortimer was mistaken. It ’s Madame Von Arnim surely,” Hilda thought.

That the lovely being should carry a violin rather puzzled her. She was still more perplexed when the lady after bowing began to play on the instrument in her hand.

“Is n’t Madame Von Arnim—”

“Hush Hilda, you must n’t talk now.”

The mystified girl sank meekly back, and stared in bewilderment at the violinist. She was so absorbed in wondering why Madame Von Arnim was not singing that she did



not heed the music. The puzzle appeared unsolvable and Hilda felt her mind to be perfectly blank. She gazed dumbly, not even noticing whether the golden-haired lady looked as beautiful as she had expected.

The playing was not more than ordinarily good; therefore no encore was demanded. Even Hilda was satisfied to have it so.

“If I were a great singer like Madame Von Arnim, I wouldn’t try to play the violin,” she thought.

“Is n’t Madame Von Arnim going to sing?” she asked.

“Yes, immediately.”

The color returned to Hilda’s cheeks, and her eyes again grew brilliant, but only for a moment.

She beheld, not her blonde divinity, but the motherly looking lady.

“What ’s she doing there?” thought Hilda. To see better she rose halfway in her seat.

The lady on the platform wore a long, sweeping black velvet gown, low in the neck and short sleeved. This, together with

a diamond necklace glistening on her white throat and her many other jewels, made her look much more imposing than she had seemed when talking to Hilda on the ship. Still Hilda knew that she had made no mistake. This lady who stood bowing and smiling in response to the tumultuous greeting from the audience, was none other than the friend who had sent her the tickets for the concert.

“Sit down, Hilda,” commanded Mrs. Mortimer.

“Who is she?” gasped Hilda as she obeyed.

“Why, Madame Von Arnim, of course.”

Madame Von Arnim! Hilda could not believe it. She did not wish to believe it. If it were true there was no firm footing of belief left. A singer without beauty was a possibility undreamed of. Still, Mrs. Mortimer must know. The motherly looking lady instead of the golden-haired one, by some trick of fate, was Madame Von Arnim.

Hilda closed her eyes—not otherwise could she have kept back the tears.

Then a marvelous thing happened. A

flood of the sweetest sound imaginable quelled the tumult within the girl's soul. It lifted her back from the brink of despair into a heaven of delight. She would not open her eyes, for now she wished not to see but to hear. Even yet she hardly deemed it possible that any but an outwardly angelic being could make of earth so celestial a place.

The singer's voice denoted the joyousness of spring. Without the training to appreciate the technique of Madame Von Arnim, Hilda knew intuitively that her singing was faultless. The voice conquered Hilda. She was ready now to worship it instead of a personality, and she opened her eyes.

"She 's much better looking than I thought. She 's really handsome. I am so glad she 's Madame Von Arnim," thought Hilda adoringly. "Her voice is beautiful, beautiful. Oh, she 's going to stop. I wish she would n't."

The burst of applause following the last note of the song seemed a desecration to the enraptured girl. Her soul was too deeply stirred for outward sign.



While the audience vociferously demanded an encore, an usher hurried down the aisle with the flowers Hilda had chosen.

Then Madame Von Arnim returned and received the flowers. She glanced at the card. The simple little message of love caused the great artist to smile in pleased acknowledgment. Already she had discovered Hilda, and now she bowed directly to her.

"Hilda, she sees you. Why don't you clap your hands?" whispered Mrs. Mortimer displeased at her seeming stolidity.

"Oh, I want her to sing again," murmured Hilda. "Can't we get her to sing some more?"

"The way to get her to sing some more is to clap your hands as the others are doing."

Instantly Hilda brought her hands together almost as in prayer. So intense was her longing to hear the wonderful voice again that she stood up, and, with her hands now clasped, looked pleadingly into the eyes of Madame Von Arnim.

In acknowledgment of the child's naive appeal, the singer smiled again.

Hilda's heart thrilled.

"I love you," she wanted to cry out. "I 'd rather have a voice like yours than to be the golden-haired lady."

"Sit down, Hilda. She 's going to sing," said Mrs. Mortimer.

Madame Von Arnim's encore was short and light. It appealed to the fancy of the less musical, and they were vociferous in their demands for a third number.

"Is n't she going to sing any more to-night?" asked Hilda after the diva had refused another encore.

"Yes, twice again."

So impatient was Hilda for her reappearance that even the pianist failed to hold her spellbound the second time. As for the golden-haired lady, she proved a disappointment in every way.

"She 's not so very beautiful after all," decided Hilda studying the violinist critically. "I 'd much rather be like my friend. The golden-haired lady is just pretty on the outside."

Her verdict was doubly confirmed by the second appearance of the famous contralto.

“Madame Von Arnim ’s beautiful inside,” Hilda thought proudly. “She makes you feel what she feels. I ’m glad, so glad, that the golden-haired lady is n’t Madame Von Arnim. It does n’t matter if you ’re not beautiful. You can be a singer just the same.”

The last number on the program was a duet between the funny little tenor and the contralto. Hilda especially enjoyed it because she divined that there was a story behind the music. She knew nothing about the opera from which the song was taken, but the action deeply appealed to her. The genius presiding at her birth had bestowed upon her not only an unusual singing voice, but a pronounced dramatic instinct as well.

When Madame Von Arnim and the tenor had sung the grand finale, it was positive pain to Hilda to have people bustling into their wraps in a hurry to be off. As an offset to her unhappiness an usher came to them from behind the scenes.

“Madame Von Arnim asks you to come to her,” he said.

The magic words once more made Hilda’s

heart beat wildly. Her first sensation was one of pleasure; then she said, "I may be afraid of her now that I know how wonderful she is. She may seem different. I hope she 'll still be kind."

CHAPTER VII

HILDA BREAKS DOWN



ADAME VON ARNIM felt tired and cross. While she waited for Mrs. Mortimer and Hilda, she caught herself wishing that she might return to her hotel without seeing any one.

“How silly I was to offer to have that child here,” she exclaimed. “My imagination is always running away with me. I hear a child sing to a baby, and immediately I say, ‘She ’s a wonder’. Then I listen to the story of a prejudiced woman, and I agree with her that the girl is a prodigy. I offered to give an opinion about her voice, but I shall be very careful to speak only the truth to-night. I must n’t raise false hopes.”

In restless impatience she swept up and down the retiring room. Such places always were distasteful to her but especially

so after the crowds were away from the hall.

“Well, child,” she demanded almost harshly as she beheld Hilda and Mrs. Mortimer in the doorway, “what do you think of the ‘beautiful, beautiful Madame Von Arnim,’ now?”

The words Hilda had meant to say fled from her. Madame Von Arnim seemed an entire stranger. She was neither the kindly friend of the day before nor the wonderful singer of the night. She was simply a grand personage with an unsmiling face.

“I—I—” stammered Hilda blushing furiously—and was unable to go on.

“She’s disappointed in me,” thought the singer, her pride hurt. She had hoped that her voice would more than offset her looks.

“It would if she had been what I first thought,” she said to herself.

“Why don’t you thank Madame Von Arnim for her kindness to us, Hilda?” asked Mrs. Mortimer breaking an awkward pause.

“I—I do thank her,” murmured Hilda

but embarrassment robbed her tone of the enthusiasm she felt.

The singer chanced to glance at the red roses which had been placed on a table.

"Your flowers are very beautiful," she said, unbending somewhat. "It was sweet of you to send them, Hilda."

"Mrs. Mortimer sent them," broke in the truthful Hilda.

"But they were Hilda's choice," added Mrs. Mortimer.

"I thank you both, then."

Madame Von Arnim was still inwardly irritated. She knew that she was expected to give an opinion on Hilda's voice, and she determined to have the ordeal over with as soon as possible.

"You can come on the stage with me, Hilda, and I 'll try your voice," she said.

"Try my voice?" faltered Hilda.

"Yes, you have heard me sing. Now I 'll hear you."

Had she planned to terrify Hilda, she could have met with no better success. The frightened girl, her eyes round and beseeching, gazed at her like an animal entrapped.



"I—I sing for you? Oh no, I can't. I can't."

"Why, yes you can." If Madame Von Arnim had been less tired, she would have been more tactful. In her heart she did not care whether Hilda sang or not.

"If she does n't follow me now, I shall have a good excuse for leaving," she thought. "Come, Hilda," she added aloud, hurrying up the steps to the stage.

"I can't sing for her. I can't do it," cried Hilda.

"You must sing," answered Mrs. Mortimer grasping her by the hand and leading her onto the stage after Madame Von Arnim.

Hilda looked on every side for a way of escape, but there was none for her; Mrs. Mortimer held her too firmly.

Many of the lights had been extinguished. The dimness amid the rows upon rows of empty seats gave a ghostly effect to the scene, and Hilda imagined voices jeering at her:

"You can't sing, little ignorant Hilda! You don't know how!"

But Mrs. Mortimer whispered, "Don't be frightened, Hilda."

Not be frightened! How could she help it when every drop of blood seemed to have left her heart, and every nerve was quivering. She understood now what Mrs. Mortimer had meant when she said, "You must not disappoint me to-night."

"Even God, unless He swallowed up my fear, could n't keep me from disappointing her," she decided hopelessly. She was too terrified, too miserable even for tears.

All this time Mrs. Mortimer was pulling her toward the piano.

Madame Von Arnim struck a number of preliminary chords. She heard the child approaching but she did not glance around.

"Now Hilda repeat this after me," and Madame ran the scale up and down several times.

Hilda's throat was parched.

"Hilda, do as Madame Von Arnim bids you," commanded Mrs. Mortimer.

But Hilda stood in mute despair.

"Well, are n't you going to sing?" de-

manded Madame Von Arnim, whirling around.

One glance at Hilda's white, woe-begone face melted the heart of the motherly woman. Instantly, instead of blaming the girl, she blamed herself, and wished she had been less abrupt. Mrs. Mortimer, however, was not only disappointed, but hurt.

"Hilda," she cried sharply, "I did n't expect such ingratitude from you. I see that you do not love me," and she dropped Hilda's hand.

"I do love you, but I can't sing," moaned Hilda, and the tears that had been frozen by fear, now streamed down her cheeks.

This conquered Madame Von Arnim.

"Never mind, lieblich, it was all my fault."

Sympathy was so unexpected that it unnerved Hilda more completely. Her sobbing grew hysterical.

Very gently Madame Von Arnim took her up in her arms, and walked over to the piano stool with her, unmindful that tears might ruin her gown.

"There, there, lieblich," she murmured

as she sat down, "stop crying. You need n't sing. We 've frightened the song all away. There have been times in my life when I could n't sing. I understand."

Hilda was comforted. With the motherly arms pressed so lovingly around her, fear fled. The great singer was no longer a personage to be dreaded. Her friend had come back. Only a dear, dear friend could comfort as she comforted, and Hilda loved her for it with all her impulsive heart. She pressed her wet face close to Madame Von Arnim's.

"I—I wanted to tell you all the time that I love you better than the golden-haired lady," she whispered. "After I heard you sing, I did n't care for her at all."

Madame Von Arnim pressed Hilda closer.

Mrs. Mortimer began to feel that perhaps she had been harsh.

"Hilda," she cried "I did n't mean what I said. I know you love me."

"Indeed I do love you," sobbed Hilda. "How could I help it when you have been so good to me! Just see the beautiful

locket Mrs. Mortimer gave me," she added to Madame Von Arnim.

"That reminds me," broke in Mrs. Mortimer, "I meant to ask Madame Von Arnim for her picture to put in the locket."

Hilda looked up in glad surprise.

"Oh, Madame, will you give me your picture?"

"I 'm not sure I have one small enough to fit, but I 'll tell you what we 'll do. Come to my rooms with me, and we 'll look over what I have.

CHAPTER VIII

A TRULY PRINCESS

URING the drive to the hotel, the singer held Hilda's hand in a motherly clasp, bestowing upon her an occasional assuring squeeze or pat. By the time Madame Von Arnim's rooms were reached, Hilda was herself.

"What a beautiful room," she exclaimed as the maid admitted them. "It 's much prettier than ours, is n't it Mrs. Mortimer?"

Her simplicity pleased Madame Von Arnim.

"I have learned to make even hotel rooms home-like," she explained, as the maid took their wraps and the red roses. "Hilda look at those photographs on the piano. They 're my children."

Hilda ran to examine the pictures. The first to catch her eye was one of a baby.

"She's the dearest little thing I ever saw," she cried, and added with unconscious flattery, "She looks just like you, Madame Von Arnim."

Then she saw the photograph of a girl of twelve or thirteen years old and while she was gazing at it, Madame Von Arnim turned to Mrs. Mortimer.

"You must not mind if I neglect you," she whispered. "I intend to make Hilda sing for me."

"I am afraid you will fail," Mrs. Mortimer replied with a sigh. She regretted more than ever the wonderful opportunity Hilda was missing.

"I have no fears. If you will go over there by the table, and pretend to be interested in the magazines, I'll wager that in less than five minutes she'll be singing for me."

"If that happens, I will say you are versed in magic."

Madame Von Arnim walked over beside Hilda.



“This is my Frieda, Hilda,” she said, taking down the picture of the girl at which Hilda had been looking. “You and she are about of an age, although Frieda looks much older.”

“She ’s very sweet, but she ’s not a bit like you.”

“No, Frieda takes after her father’s family,” exclaimed Madame Von Arnim proudly. This daughter evidently was a great favorite. “Frieda has n’t quite outgrown dolls, as I bought one for her to-day.”

“Marie,” she called to the maid, “bring that new doll to me.”

“Now what do you think of her ladyship?” she continued a moment later placing in Hilda’s arms a large doll with golden hair and brown eyes.

“Oh, it ’s beautiful.”

“I ’ll have Frieda name her dolly after you, Hilda. It ’s so big, it seems almost like a baby does n’t it?”

Hilda nodded her head.

“Bring dolly over here, and sit in this rocker beside me. That ’s right. Now I ’m

going to tell you about my babykin. Every time I 'm away from her, I learn a new song to sing to her. You know the kind of song I mean; one that when baby lies in your arms, like dolly there, makes baby cuddle closer and closer until baby drowzes off into slumberland."

Hilda, hugging the doll contentedly to her heart rocked back and forth, unaffectedly interested in what was being said.

"I have not learned a song for baby this time. Poor little dear, she 'll be so sad if I return without one. I wish there were some one to teach me a song."

Hilda did not nibble at the bait.

"Mrs. Mortimer tells me you have a baby sister, Hilda. You must know some pretty song that you sing to her. If you 'll teach me one of them I 'll sing my favorite to you to learn from me. Then we 'll both know new lullabies for our babies. Would you like that?"

"But I don't know anything about singing like you," objected Hilda.

"Oh, lullabies don't count. Just make be-

lieve you have your sister in your arms, and I 'll just think about my baby."

Hilda grew interested in the make-believe. She rocked back and forth wondering what kind of lullaby Madame Von Arnim's baby would like.

"I know a little German lullaby. Shall I sing it?" she asked finally.

"That 's the very one I want. German lullabies are the nicest of all."

Hilda readjusted the doll in her arms, and began to croon her song imagining that the doll was Annette, and that she must sing her very best because the baby was so restless. Not even at first did her tones quaver, so completely did the spirit of her make-believe possess her. Presently the dulcet undertone swelled to rich, full notes that showed the unusual power of the voice. Its mellow beauty made Madame Von Arnim marvel. But it was the naturalness of the singer that impressed her most, for it transported her back to a German fireside. In Hilda she saw a motherly hausfrau whose whole life was bound up in her family.

“The baby’s eyes begin to blink,” she said presently, for Hilda’s manner and voice indicated this.

Back to it ’s crooning ebbed the wondrous voice, lost at last in a faint echo.

Madame Von Arnim catching Mrs. Mortimer’s eyes and fearing that she was about to break the spell, placed a warning finger on her lips. Without a word of comment she turned to Hilda.

“Let me take the baby, Hilda, and I ’ll try your lullaby,” she said, holding out her arms.

Hilda arose quietly and entrusted the doll to Madame Von Arnim.

“She ’s waking up,” she whispered, “but your singing will put her to sleep again I know.”

The great artist began humming the lullaby. For a moment, she sang it accurately, then purposely she made a mistake.

“That ’s not right. It goes this way,” interrupted Hilda giving the correct melody.

Madame Von Arnim nodded her head,

well pleased. "Yes, yes, now I see. I think I have it—this way?" and the rest was flawlessly rendered.

"It 's just like being home to hear you, only nicer," commented Hilda.

Madame Von Arnim thought that a pretty compliment.

"You 're going to sing for me now, aren't you?" pleaded Hilda. "The song you teach me will be the nicest one I ever learned."

Her interest pleased Madame Von Arnim, but she decided to test Hilda in a difficult song, wishing to be sure that the girl was the genius Mrs. Mortimer believed her to be.

"Hilda," she cautioned, "you must listen very carefully and try to do better than I by not making a single mistake."

"I can never sing as you do, but I 'll do my best," promised Hilda.

"The selection I have made is a little high for my voice, but it will suit yours all the better." Purposely she gave the song in rather slow time so that Hilda might the better follow her.

The enraptured girl sat motionless. The voice singing now just for her benefit, pleased her more and more, and she was not the least frightened. No one need be frightened before a dear friend who understood little girls so well and who loved babies.

Toward the end of the song, Madame Von Arnim no longer held herself in check. She forgot to sing slowly, and she even embellished the ballad with some of her wonderful trills.

“Do you think you can sing my song, Hilda?” she asked after her triumphant close.

“I can sing some of it, only I ’d have to practise to make those trills as you do.”

“I had to practise much myself, so just do the best you can.”

Hilda’s rich, young voice rang out clear and true. Once or twice she imitated Madame Von Arnim’s mannerisms. As to the trills, she reproduced them marvelously well.

Madame Von Arnim impulsively bent

over Hilda, and drawing the girl up to her, she kissed her.

"God has been very kind to you, Hilda," she said, keeping her arm around her.

"He has given you a beautiful voice. Still you have your part to do. We singers must work, work, work. Every day of your life, Hilda, you must remember that five talents have been intrusted to your keeping, but you are to make of them ten so that more shall be given you."

Madame Von Arnim turned to Mrs. Mortimer who had also risen, and was as deeply impressed as Hilda by the solemnity of the singer's words.

"You have made no mistake in giving Hilda her chance, Mrs. Mortimer. It is a great privilege to help develop a genius like hers. Her principal task during the next few years should be to acquire as much knowledge as possible, but do not force her voice. Let her have lessons in instrumental music."

"Hilda," she added, "learn, learn, learn all the time. Then learn more. I expect

great things of you," and again she kissed her.

"In two or three years if you want more advice, bring her to me," she continued to Mrs. Mortimer. Then she drew a ring from her little finger.

"Hilda, Mrs. Mortimer gave you one remembrance of this night. I give you now another. This ring belonged to my little girl who died. It is sacred to me, but not too sacred for you because of the voice God has given you. It will be a pledge between you and me in all the years to come that I will do what I can to help you."

As she placed the ring on Hilda's middle finger the child felt more than ever like an enchanted princess. Magical things were happening so fast, it seemed as if a whole kingdom full of fairies must be working in her behalf. She lifted her arms to Madame Von Arnim.

"I love you. I can't thank you," she murmured with a hug and then a kiss.

"We should be going," suggested Mrs. Mortimer. "We must not impose upon Madame Von Arnim. She—"

"But I have n't her picture yet for my locket," objected Hilda.

"So you have n't forgotten that!" cried Madame Von Arnim, her eyes twinkling with merriment.

"No, and I 'll care so very, very much for it. You will give it to me, won't you?"

She was so earnest that Madame Von Arnim fitted one of her small photographs into the locket.

"This will help you not to forget me, Hilda."

"I could n't forget you. I love you too much, and I shall always remember what you have said to me."

"When I 'm an old, old lady, I shall go and hear a wonderful singer. And I shall say to myself, 'When she was a little girl, I told her she had a God-given voice.'"

"Do you mean me, Madame Von Arnim?" cried Hilda her eyes dancing.


"Yes, lieblich, I do mean you. You will be famous some day if you make the most of your voice."

With this prophecy ringing in her ears, Hilda bade her hostess farewell. That

Madame Von Arnim believed anything so amazing was the culminating glory of the whole day. Instead of the fairies changing her into an enchanted princess, she found that through her voice she was one by birth. Hers was the true blood royal. The queen of song had proclaimed it so.

CHAPTER IX

A GLIMPSE OF SILVIO

R. MORTIMER'S dislike of children sealed Hilda's fate.

"That little foreign girl cannot stay in my house," he declared. "What were you thinking of to bring her home with you?" he demanded of his wife.

"She 's a great comfort to me. Besides Hilda is a genius. Madame Von Arnim—"

"A genius indeed," sneered Mr. Mortimer. "Deliver me from living in the same house with any genius. She 's got to go. I 'm worried to death as it is. I tell you, I 'll not stand it. Either she goes or I do. I 'll not live in the same house with her."

Mrs. Mortimer saw the uselessness of trying to change his mind. She realized that some business trouble was making him irritable and unreasonable. Just at this



point Mr. Mortimer had to make a flying trip West. When he returned Hilda had disappeared, and he was so preoccupied that he forgot to ask his wife about her.

Mrs. Mortimer, however, was providing for Hilda. Her love and interest in her protege had not lessened. She felt no self-sacrifice too great to give Hilda an education, and having money of her own, she had placed Hilda in a boarding-school in Cleveland.

With her slight knowledge of English, Hilda was very homesick at first. Soon she made two friends who were willing to help her all they could. These were the teachers of French and German. The latter knew French also and always spoke it with the French teacher, and this made the pair very companionable.

Hilda made another good friend, a town girl who came in for lessons and who was well advanced in French.

One memorable day, just as Hilda was settling into the routine of boarding-school life, she was invited to go with this new

friend and her mother to a matinee at the Hippodrome.

The performance of itself was most interesting to Hilda, as the only other entertainment she had ever attended was Madame Von Arnim's concert. But near the end, when a troupe of trapeze performers appeared, her excitement knew no bounds.

"I—I believe there 's the boy who wanted to help me on the boat," she said to herself. "Yes, it really is Silvio Rossi."

She was inclined to tell her friend of her discovery but bethought herself how Mrs. Mortimer has disapproved of Silvio.

"Ruth might feel as Mrs. Mortimer did, I 'd better not tell her," she decided.

Hilda's heart thumped all during that act. Silvio's fearlessness and agility won him applause on every side; but no one clapped harder than Hilda for from her own training she knew all the fine points in his work.

"He 's very wonderful," she thought proudly. "I 'd give anything to speak to him. I wish I might, but perhaps he has

forgotten all about me, and Mrs. Mortimer would n't like it if I tried to see him."

And so, when Silvio made his final bow, Hilda feared that she might never see him again.

"If he saw me, would he remember me?" she wondered.

The rest of the performance interested her little. When it was all over and she was out on the avenue with her friends she heard newsboys crying excitedly.

"Ruth, why are they making so much noise?" she asked her friend. Newsboy's English still baffled her.

"Oh, they 're calling out an extra—something about the suicide defaulter," Ruth answered indifferently. "Mother and I have some errands. Will you come with us, Hilda?"

"I must n't. I have some bothersome English to study. Thank your mother for me please, Ruth," and she said good bye to the lady.

When Hilda boarded the car she was followed by the cry of the newsboys who were

trying to sell their papers to homeward bound passengers.

Hilda smiled. "It 's strange what funny things I make out of English," she thought. "Sometimes it sounds as if they were yelling the name of Mortimer."

At the school Hilda was able to enter without ringing. She would have gone directly to her room but as she passed a curtained doorway at her right, she heard French being spoken. She recognized the voices of her two teachers and turned toward the door, intending to tell them how much she had enjoyed her afternoon.

"What will Mrs. Mortimer do about poor Hilda? It 's awful, awful," exclaimed the German teacher just as Hilda had her hand outstretched to pull aside the curtain.

The startled girl stopped abruptly, affected by the horror in her teacher's tone. For a few moments she was stunned; then a pain shot through her heart and she felt too weak and too curious to move away.

"And I 've got to break it to Hilda," said the French teacher. "I was in hopes

she might be sent right back to Mrs. Mortimer, but—”

“From what the papers say, Mrs. Mortimer is left penniless,” interrupted the German teacher. “She may not want Hilda at all now.”

“Mrs. Mortimer not want me,” gasped Hilda. The mystery was growing unbearable.

“I ’m very sorry for Hilda—you know how fond I am of her—but no one could blame Mrs. Mortimer if she decides that she cannot be burdened with the child,” continued the German woman. “Do you suppose she will send Hilda back to her own people?”

“I ’m sure I don’t know what is to become of the poor little thing. Oh, a suicide is awful.”

“Yes, but it ’s almost inevitable in a case like this. If people will speculate with other people’s money they must expect the tide to turn against them some day. It ’s no wonder John Mortimer shot himself.

“I must go to Mrs. Mortimer,” was Hilda’s thought.

She did not feel equal to the ordeal of facing the teachers and telling them of her intention. So very stealthily and hurriedly she slipped back into the street.

The frosty air calmed her, but it was hard to think clearly. The horror of what the teachers had revealed pursued her. She glanced back fearfully. No one was following. She walked rapidly intending to take the suburban car when it came along.

"The teachers will be frightened," she quavered, "but I can't help it." She felt that she could not bear ever to hear the sound of their voices again. Suddenly she grasped the full significance of all they had said and she halted abruptly.

"I can't go to Mrs. Mortimer. They said she would n't want me, and that she is poor, and that I would be a burden to her. What shall I do? What shall I do?"

Had her life been sheltered like the lives of some children she would probably have returned to the school to await the course of events. But Hilda was only too well acquainted with poverty. She had already grappled with want. In her school of ex-

perience, waiting and words of sympathy were unknown qualities. No matter how young people were, unless they were mere babies, they were expected to work. So in this dark hour all her instinct was for action.

“I ought to do something. I must do something to earn money for her, but what can I do? What can I do?” she repeated over and over but no answer came. “She lent us money and now I ’ve just got to pay her back.”

On and on she walked and presently reached the heart of the city, then turned a corner and wandered aimlessly toward the lake.

“I must do something to help Mrs. Mortimer. Dear God, please show me what to do,” she prayed, feeling, of herself most helpless.

Little Hilda believed that love, not error, was her guiding star. Could she have seen that by running away she was doing very wrong; that such action could only make Mrs. Mortimer the more unhappy, she would have gone back and listened to what

the French teacher had to say however terrible that now seemed. Unfortunately she had no way of knowing.

Down by the water it was cold and windy but Hilda was so tired that she sat down on one of the deserted benches in the little park. It was the dinner hour but she was not hungry.

“They said I might be sent home,” she thought with new terror, for the first time pitying herself. “Then I never never can be a singer like Madame Von Arnim. I do want that to come true. Oh God, please make it come true!”

The ring that the great singer had given her was on her finger. Hilda nervously twisted it around and around. The remembrance of that wonderful night and the thought that now all her hopes seemed blasted unnerved her and the tears streamed down her cheeks.

“I must n’t cry. I must do something,” she repeated drying her eyes.

Suddenly she sprang to her feet.

“I can sing on the street as I used to at

home. Sometimes I made quite a little that way."

It did not strike Hilda that such an action would seem incongruous in a well-dressed girl. She only felt that she must earn money for Mrs. Mortimer.

She was very cold but with new hope surging in her heart, she forgot her discomfort. She started rapidly uptown fully determined to sing in America as she had done in the little German town, her only fear that she could not control her voice.

"I must try," she said. "I must try."

CHAPTER X

BEHIND THE SCENES



A little before eight that evening, Silvio Rossi came swinging up the avenue towards the Hippodrome. He was on his way to prepare for the evening's performance, having dined away from his father and sister.

When he was almost opposite the alley that leads to the stage, he saw a little girl leaning against a building looking very cold and miserable. He wished to speak to her, but he hardly dared. She was too well-dressed for a beggar.

Suddenly she sprang towards him.

"Oh, Silvio," she cried with a pitiful catch in her voice, "do you remember me?"

He was so startled that for an instant he could not remember where he had seen her, familiar though her face was.

"I 'm sorry—" he began.

"You 're not angry with me because I did n't come back that day? Truly it was n't my fault."

"No, I 'm not angry," he replied trying hard to place her.

"You don't remember me. Oh, you must remember me. I 'm the girl who climbed the mast on the ship, and you wanted to help me."

The light of recognition glowed in his face. "Of course I remember you, Hilda," he cried, "but what are you doing here? You look frozen."

"I—I am cold, I 've been waiting nearly two hours."

"Waiting?" repeated Silvio.

"Yes. I—I had some awful news. I must make money. I thought of something that might bring me a little and I came up here by the Hippodrome to try. Then I remembered seeing you this afternoon—I was at the matinee—and it came back to me what you said on the boat. I 've been walking up and down ever since hoping I 'd see you."

“What I said on the boat?” asked Silvio, not comprehending. “What did I say?”

“You said—” Hilda was so cold and so disappointed that she almost broke down. For a moment she could not go on.

“Please tell me,” Silvio said to encourage her.

Hilda hastily drew her hand across her eyes. “I—I ’m not going to cry,” she murmured pitifully. “You—you said if I ever wanted a position that I could come along with you because your father had been looking for a little girl like me. So I thought that would be better than the other thing I was going to do, and I ’ve been asking God ever since to send you to me. You will help me, won’t you?”

Silvio hardly knew what to say or how to act. He again noticed that Hilda was well-dressed, but her manner and words left no doubt of her distress.

Silvio hesitated. To himself he said, “They don’t like strangers back of the scenes, but the manager ’s so friendly he ’ll not make a fuss if I take her behind with me.” To Hilda he added, “If you will

come with me my father and sister may know what to do. But you 'll have to wait until our act is over."

Hilda gladly accompanied him back of the scenes.

"She 's my friend," Silvio said to the stage manager. "Can't she stay here until I go?" and he pointed to a chair where Hilda would be out of the way.

The manager could not resist Silvio's winning smile.

"Very well, but tell her to keep quiet."

"Hilda, you must n't move from this chair," cautioned Silvio. "I must leave you for a while now."

After he was gone, Hilda, had an impulse to run away. The place was so vast and strange that it frightened her. Soon the stage people came flocking into the wings, for the performance was about to begin. Hilda could not picture herself as ever being of their number.

"I—I 'd much rather be a singer," she thought miserably. "If poor Mrs. Mortimer did n't really need money, I never



could be an acrobat. It does n't seem natural like singing."

Out in the audience people were laughing uproarously at the antics of a clown; behind the scenes a young girl was crying, but so quietly that she escaped notice.

"I 'd be a burden to Mrs. Mortimer," was the thought that gave Hilda keenest pain. "I must n't be that. I must help her."

She found it hard to be brave. With the consciousness of heavy responsibilities resting upon her young shoulders and the sense of homelessness, she could not dry her tears.

When Silvio returned, ready to go on the stage, he saw that his little friend was crying. There were still a few minutes before their act, so he hurried to the dressing-room of Leonora, his half sister, who, both from her age and her devotion, seemed almost a mother to him.

"Leonora," he began hurriedly, "I want you to come down stairs to comfort a little girl. She 's the one I met on the boat."

"The one you met—"

“Yes, you know—the girl who climbed the mast. I told you about her. Well, she ’s in trouble now, and wants to come with us. We must persuade father to take her. He ’s just got to.”

“Tell me more about her, Silvio.”

“We can’t stop now. She ’s crying, and it makes my heart ache to have her feel so badly. You can comfort her I know.”

On the way down he added, “You ’ll have to speak French to her. You don ’t know German and she speaks only a little English.”

Leonora was prepared to be kind to Hilda for Silvio’s sake, but when she saw the wee stranger, her dejected attitude so touched Leonora’s heart that, with the impulsiveness of her Italian nature, she hurried over and knelt down beside her.

“Silvio asked me to come to you—I ’m his sister,” began Leonora sympathetically, “and you must trust me—I ’ll be your friend. So tell me, cara mia, why are you unhappy? Have n’t you a home?”

“No,” faltered Hilda.

“Why are n’t your friends looking after you then?”

“The lady who was to adopt me is too poor now to want me. If I can’t go with Silvio as he said, I don’t know what I shall do. Please—please let me go with you.”

“You shall go with us, Hilda,” spoke up Silvio. Already he looked upon himself as her protector.

At this moment the act of the Rossi troupe was called.

“Silvio, you must not promise too much,” cautioned Leonora. In answer to Hilda’s disappointed look, she added. “We ’ll talk to my father about you.”

After their act when Salvatore Rossi heard about Hilda, he shook his head decisively.

“We can’t take a strange girl away with us,” he declared. “It ’s out of the question entirely.”

“But, Father, talk to her,” implored Silvio. “She ’s just the girl you ’ve been looking for these many, many years.”

Thus urged Rossi went with his son to

Hilda. His sharp eyes immediately saw that she was not dressed like a poor girl.

“What were you doing out in the street alone?” he asked studying her face keenly. “You are too young for that, my child.”

“I ’m thirteen,” she answered trying not to be afraid, but she could not bear the piercing brightness of his eyes. Her glance faltered so that she looked guilty.

“She ’s running away. She ’s stage struck,” Rossi decided. Aloud he said gruffly. “Silvio, we must be dressing. Our train leaves in an hour now,” and with that he abruptly walked away.

“He—he ’s not going to take me!” Hilda wailed.

“Yes he is,” Silvio blurted. “You wait while I talk to him.”

Silvio rushed after his father, and overtook him before he had reached their dressing room.

“Father, we ’ve got to take Hilda with us. The lady who was going to adopt her lost her money and—”

“That ’s a made up story,” muttered Rossi.

“No, it is n’t Father. Anyway, she was trained to be an acrobat.”

“I don’t believe that either.”

“I know it ’s true. I saw her go up a mast, and only a girl with training could do that. Besides her father was an acrobat before—”

“Her father?” questioned Rossi with new interest. “What was his name?”

“I don’t know, but I ’m sure Hilda will tell you all about him if you ask her. Please do talk to her some more. I ’ll bring her up to our dressing room,” and before Rossi could object, Silvio was flying down the curving stairs.

“Hilda,” he said excitedly, taking her by the hand, “come on, but be careful what you say to father. Above all things tell him only the truth.”

“I would n’t tell a lie,” answered Hilda proudly.

“I did n’t believe you would, only I thought it best to warn you, for you ’ll be cross-questioned pretty closely.”

While they were talking he was leading her upstairs. Hilda tried to calm herself,

but she could not help feeling nervous and weak. Besides the shock of Mr. Mortimer's suicide, she was now suffering from the effects of being out in the cold so long without anything to eat. The strangeness of her surroundings further affected her.

As the boy and girl entered the dressing room, Rossi looked up and frowned. The next instant he was ashamed of his petulance. Hilda was very pale and there were deep circles under her great, dark eyes.

Without a word, Rossi walked over and picked her up. No chair being at hand, he placed her on a trunk.

"Now," he said almost kindly, "you can tell me your father's name."

"His real name is Fritz Walfels, but—"

"I never heard of him," muttered Rossi.

"Maybe you 'd know his stage name. It was Versen, and—"

"Not Hans Versen?"

"Yes sir. That 's my father."

Rossi stooped over and kissed her.

"Why, my dear child," he said, "your father and I were in a troupe together when

we were boys. I have n't heard of him for years. Tell me all about him."

So Hilda told of the accident that had darkened her father's life.

"Hans a cripple! What a pity," Rossi exclaimed, then added to himself, "It 's a strange thing for Hans Versen's daughter to come to me in America. How do you happen to be in this country, Hilda?" he asked.

"A rich lady came to Germany, and brought me home with her. She—"

"A rich lady?" interrupted Rossi disappointedly.

Hilda's chin quivered. "She was rich, but she 's very poor now and so she does n't want me."

"Well, Hilda," said Rossi patting her on the shoulder, "don't you mind. It 's fortunate you came to me. You shall go with us to New York. You and Silvio ought to make a great team."

Not a word had escaped Silvio. Now he rushed excitedly forward.

"That 's fine, is n't it, Hilda?"

She nodded her head, but looked somewhat doubtful.

“What ’s the trouble, Hilda?” asked Rossi.

“I was wondering whether I can make money right away.”

Rossi was surprised and displeased. “She ’s too young to be so avaricious,” he thought.

“That depends upon how much you know, Hilda. As soon as you are ready to act with us, I ’ll begin paying you. Do you have to send word to anyone before starting?”

“Maybe I ’d better write a letter,” she answered.

This is what she wrote and sent before her departure:

“My dear, dear Mrs. Mortimer:

“I left school because I heard the teachers—they did n’t know I heard—talking about Mr. Mortimer’s death. I expected to go right back to you until I remembered that the teachers said you were so terribly poor that you would n’t want me. So I decided I must work, and help

you, but I did n't know what to do. So I just prayed God to show me and He did.

"I 'm with nice kind people—the boy—they have a son," she added enigmatically, "is very, very nice, and he 's my friend already. Leonora the sister is quite old, but she is good to me. I 'm to make money before very long, and then can help you.

"Please write Madame Von Arnim that it is n't my fault my not being a singer. If I 'd only had the chance you planned for me, I might have made you both glad you helped me." Here tears splashed down and blotted the words, but Hilda had to let the letter go that way as the moments were few in which to write.

"They say I must stop now, but I want you to know that I still love you with all my heart.

"Your Very Own,

"HILDA."

CHAPTER XI

A NEW JOY IN LIFE



ALVATORE ROSSI rented a small apartment in New York, as he was engaged to play the entire season at the Hippodrome. He and his children always craved the comforts of a home, and they kept house whenever it was possible.

Rossi belonged to the school of acrobats who looked on life and their calling with the deepest respect. He was an educated man, and he thoroughly loved his vocation.

One morning soon after their arrival, he took Hilda to the gymnasium to learn what she could do.

“Silvio seems to think she knows a good deal, but I ’d better go on the principle that she has everything to learn,” Rossi said to himself.

Meanwhile Hilda was arraying herself

in some fleshings Leonora had bought for her. The young girl felt very strange in them, but not as strange as an ordinary child would have felt, for her father had accustomed her to a costume. Still she was bashful about appearing in it even though she expected to see no one but Mr. Rossi, who had purposely gone to the gymnasium very early.

When she was finally out in the middle of the floor, Rossi looked her over approvingly, and smiled to himself.

“She looks more of a midget than ever,” he thought. “If she knows anything at all, she cannot fail of being a favorite.”

“My child,” he said, “you may sometimes find me very strict, but I shall always have your good at heart. A modern teacher would begin with just floor work—flip-flaps,” he added contemptuously. “I’m glad to say I was trained in the old school.” His piercing eyes grew even brighter while his tone and manner were so compelling that his little pupil hung on every word he uttered. “Then our instructors made grace the first essential.

Nowadays gymnastics seem their one thought. They don't mind how the novice uses his arms and legs and therefore his work is almost always angular. He scales up a rope anyway to get there."

His eyes snapped. Hilda felt that in him she would have a very strict master.

"I'll not tolerate awkwardness in my pupils. There's Silvio for example. He knows how to cross a stage. His arms move with a free sweep. When he climbs he is always applauded. His movements remind spectators of a perfect statue come to life. Thus they learned in old Grecian days when athletes truly was an art. So, child, you must be graceful."

"What—what shall I do to be graceful, Mr. Rossi?" stammered Hilda.

"Hold your arms this way. Now come up on one toe, at the same time swinging one hand up and the other down with a free curving movement," and he illustrated what he wished done.

Hilda copied him exactly.

"Good, good," cried Rossi.

Then he tried her on a number of other

exercises for suppleness and freedom. He watched her every move, but even with his critical eye failed to find many defects.

“Versen has done very well indeed by her,” he thought.

Next he put her through some floor work, and discovered that in this also she had much more knowledge and aptitude than he had dared hope.

He also had her climb up on the bars, and do a little work there. He was more delighted than ever.

“That ’s enough for to-day, Hilda,” he said, “you ’ve done so well that I shall arrange for rehearsals with Leonora and Silvio and my assistants at the Hippodrome. If I ’m not greatly mistaken you ’ll need only a little practice before you can appear with us. I ’ll have to get a license for you, but I can easily arrange that.”

“And can you make me graceful, Mr. Rossi?”

“No, Hilda, I can’t make you graceful.” Then he added hastily, “you are graceful already.”

“You can go now,” continued Rossi,

when she was down on the floor beside him. "Tell Leonora not to expect me home this noon. I will meet them at the Hippodrome."

Their apartment was within walking distance, and on the way home Hilda chanced to hear an organ grinder. Even this poor playing made the music-hungry girl feel so badly that she could scarcely keep back the tears. It stirred within her an intense longing for Mrs. Mortimer, and all that Mrs. Mortimer meant. The glow that had come when Rossi praised her was gone. She no longer wanted to be an acrobat; she wanted to be a singer like Madame Von Arnim.

Reaching home, she was glad that neither Leonora nor Silvio saw her enter. Her room was at the back of the flat. She heard the sister and brother in the dining-room—Silvio had his lessons there mornings, and it had been agreed that Hilda should join in them as soon as she returned. But now she felt too disconsolate. So she glided into the sitting room, and

threw herself down on the lounge without even stopping to remove her wraps.

Here a little later Silvio found her in tears.

“What ’s the matter, Hilda?” he cried, bending over her. “Are you homesick? What makes you cry?”

“I—I heard some music on the street,” she sobbed, without raising her tear-stained face from the cushion.

“Don’t you like music?”

“I—I love it better than anything else in the world. I ’d give a good deal to hear some now.”

Silvio’s pulse beat fast.

“Where ’s Father?” he asked, turning quite red because of the thought he had in mind.

“He ’s not coming home.”

“Stop crying then, Hilda. I ’ll play for you.”

She looked up at him in surprise. “You? Do you really play?”

“A little,” he answered sheepishly, “but don’t let Father know.”

“Why not?”

“He hates music. My grandfather taught me while my father was out on the road. When my father discovered my love of playing, he was angrier than I ’ve ever seen him since. He took me away with him, vowing that I should n’t be a musician.”

“I ’m so glad you like music. I ’m wild to hear you play,” then her face fell. “But we have n’t a piano.”

“But I have a violin,” he said triumphantly, and flew out of the room.

A moment later he returned, case in hand.

“My grandfather gave me this violin,” he explained as he drew it lovingly out. “It has a beautiful tone. It ’s very valuable, too.”

His sparkling eyes and animated face showed Hilda that he truly loved music.

“But I wish he sang, or even played the piano,” she thought and this feeling grew stronger as he tuned his violin. She wanted to run from the room so discordant were the sounds.

“Now it ’s all ready,” said Silvio. He

was radiantly happy, himself, which deluded him into the belief that she was equally pleased. "What kind of a piece would you like?"

"Oh,—I don't know," she stammered.

He ran his bow thoughtfully across the strings. Hilda did not shudder now for the tone he drew forth was very beautiful. She noted also the grace of his attitude. His bearing the true music-lover.

When he began to play, Hilda's surprise and delight were unbounded.

"I did n't know violin music was like that," she thought. "It 's almost as good as hearing Madame Von Arnim. He makes the violin sing."

Under the magic of his exquisite touch, all her sadness fled. Her longing was satisfied; joy flooded her soul. She leaned far forward. She loved to watch as well as to hear the young boy with his genius inspired eyes.

"Silvio," she cried enthusiastically as he finished the melody, "that was very beautiful."

"It is beautiful, is n't it?—not my play-



ing but the piece. My grandfather composed it for me."

"That makes it all the nicer. Please play something else for me."

He began a quaint little tune. It was sweetly simple, and Hilda liked it almost more than the first selection.

"I love that. Did your grandfather compose it, too, Silvio?"

His face turned very red. "No," he stammered, "I—I—"

She wondered at his embarrassment.

Still blushing, he finally blurted out, "It just came into my head one day after grandfather had been talking to me about music. He liked it so much that he helped me write it down."

"You don't really mean you composed it yourself? How perfectly lovely. It's so very sweet, I wish there were words to it. I'd love to sing it."

"Do you sing?"

"Yes, a little."

"Then you must sing for me."

"Oh, I could n't after your playing. You ought to be a musician."

“That ’s what grandfather always said, though sometimes he could be very strict with me. Once in a great while he ’d snatch my violin from me shouting, ‘No, no, Silvio, that ’s not right, you should play this way.’ Then when I caught his meaning, and he was satisfied, he ’d press me to his heart crying, ‘Silvio, my boy, the world will hear from you yet. You ’ve genius, genius! When I am dead and gone, you ’ll remember my words. You cannot fail. The music in your soul must make itself heard.’ But he did n’t know,” sighed Silvio, his enthusiasm dying out. “Father will never, never consent. He hates music too much.”

“I wonder why?” asked Hilda.

“I ’m not sure. Leonora did tell me that my mother’s being a singer had something to do with it, but she would never tell me anything more. Both she and father act so mysterious about my mother, they will hardly let me mention her name. Sometimes I ’d give anything to be back in Italy with my grandfather.”

“Are you ever going back to him?” asked Hilda, her eyes round with wonder.

“I don’t know. I’ve always dreamed of going some day. The last thing grandfather said was, ‘Silvio, don’t be discouraged. Your father has the right to make you do as he wishes now, but he cannot always hold you in check. Take your violin along with you, and no matter how your father makes you work, don’t let your fingers grow stiff. Practice whenever you can. Your old grandfather will always be waiting for you in Florence, and some day you’ll come back to him. Then together we’ll make a wonderful musician of you.’ This has encouraged me to keep up my practice.”

“Would n’t it be lovely if you could be a violinist, and I could be a singer?”

“That would be splendid! Please sing something,” he added, more to be polite than from any real interest.

“I—I don’t know much about music.”

“Oh never mind. I’ll not criticise you,” he answered in rather a lofty manner. He seated himself on the couch, still holding

his violin. He loved to keep it near him. As Hilda still hesitated he said, "Stand over there where I can see you."

"I—I 'll just sit in this rocker," she answered. To reassure herself she recalled how Madame Von Arnim had praised her singing.

As soon as she was seated, she began the song the great prima donna had taught her. At first her voice trembled slightly. Soon, however, she lost her fear, and her notes flowed forth with the old power and sweetness.

Silvio's surprise was even greater than Hilda's had been. He gazed spellbound at the little songstress. She appeared transformed. Had an angel appeared before him, he would have been no more dumb-founded.

His astonishment was so great that he uttered no word, but stared so strangely at her that she blushed.

"I—I told you I did n't know much about music," she murmured misinterpreting his silence.

This aroused him. In a burst of enthu-

siasm, he rushed over and caught her by the arm.

“Why did n’t you tell me?” he demanded, his eyes ablaze.

“Tell you what?”

“That you can sing. Oh, it ’s a great pity!”

She was hurt. “A—pity that I sing?”

“No, no. If I had known, you should not be wasting your life at trapeze work. Now father ’ll want to keep you at it always.”

She looked up at him timidly smiling. “Madame Von Arnim liked my voice. She said I ’d be a great singer some day.”

“Madame Von Arnim? Who ’s she?”

“Don’t you know? She ’s the great, great contralto.”

Silvio had heard Madame Von Arnim sing, but he thought it impossible that Hilda meant her.

“You don’t really know Madame Von Arnim?”

Hilda nodded her head gravely. She was making up her mind to confide in Silvio.

“She was on the boat,” and then she

told about Madame Von Arnim and Mrs. Mortimer. She ended with the tragedy of the night when she had accosted him.

"You should n't have left Mrs. Mortimer that way," commented Silvio.

"But I could n't be a burden," cried Hilda. "She 's poor."

"No matter how poor she was, she 'd want you," returned Silvio with conviction. "A singer like Madame Von Arnim would not praise your voice as she did unless it was very unusual. Tell me more about her."

"This is the ring she gave me," said Hilda, holding up her hand for him to see. "She said it was to be a pledge that she 'd always help me."

Silvio made a motion as if to draw the ring from her finger.

"Let 's send it to her, and write that you need help."

"I could n't part with my ring. It might never reach her," she answered, withdrawing her hand.

"Hilda, you must be a singer." Silvio

began walking up and down. He was trying to plan a suitable future for her.

Suddenly he stepped in front of her. "I 'll tell you what! I 'll save up money, and then we can run away to grandfather. He 'll help you, too, I know."

Hilda shook her head.

"That would n't be right. It would make your father feel terribly, and he is very good to me. Besides I must make money for Mrs. Mortimer."

Silvio hated to relinquish his plan, but he knew that he was wrong. So he began searching his mind to think what else might be done.

Then he had an idea. He hastened to the table and picked up a paper. In new excitement he turned the pages to the amusement column and glanced rapidly over the notices.

"Farewell performance, Saturday afternoon, Madame Von Arnim"—he read, and let the paper drop.

"Oh Hilda," he cried, turning to her and catching her by the arm, "I 've a wonderful idea."

“What is it?” she cried.

He shook his head tantalizingly, and let go of her arm.

“I ’m afraid I can’t arrange it. Father ’d be awful angry.”

“Please tell me about it anyway.”

“No, I must n’t raise false hopes, so I ’ll not tell.”

CHAPTER XII

SILVIO'S SURPRISE



THE following morning Silvio started to leave home immediately after breakfast.

“Silvio,” called Rossi, “you know you ’re to be at the Hippodrome at ten. I ’ve arranged to have Hilda practice there then.”

Hilda did up the breakfast dishes, as Leonora had some marketing to see to. These domestic tasks made Hilda feel much more at home.

“When father planned to take me with him, I used to wonder what professional people would be like. They ’re just like everybody else—at least the Rossis are,” she thought.

“We must be going, Hilda,” called Rossi.

“Do you know where Silvio went this

morning?" he asked when they were outside.

"No, sir."

"Well, he and Leonora are up to something. I caught them whispering last night, and they acted confused when they saw me. This morning, Leonora asked if I could n't arrange to have our act earlier Saturday, as Silvio wants to get off. I 'd have refused, but she reminded that he 'd never asked such a thing before, and she said that he wanted to take you somewhere with him. So I decided it would be all right."

Hilda was pleased that Silvio was thus thinking of her, and wondered what treat he could be planning.

"Hilda," continued Rossi, "I want you to make your debut just as soon as possible. That 's one reason I let Silvio have his holiday with you. Hereafter you 'll be kept pretty busy. For after you 're once able to act regularly with us, we 'll have to think about some tutoring for you. I intend you shall be just as well educated as my own children."

When they had reached their destination Rossi took Hilda behind the scenes, and upstairs to a dressing room.

She found Leonora awaiting her, and there was also a dark lady who turned at Hilda's entrance and stared at her.

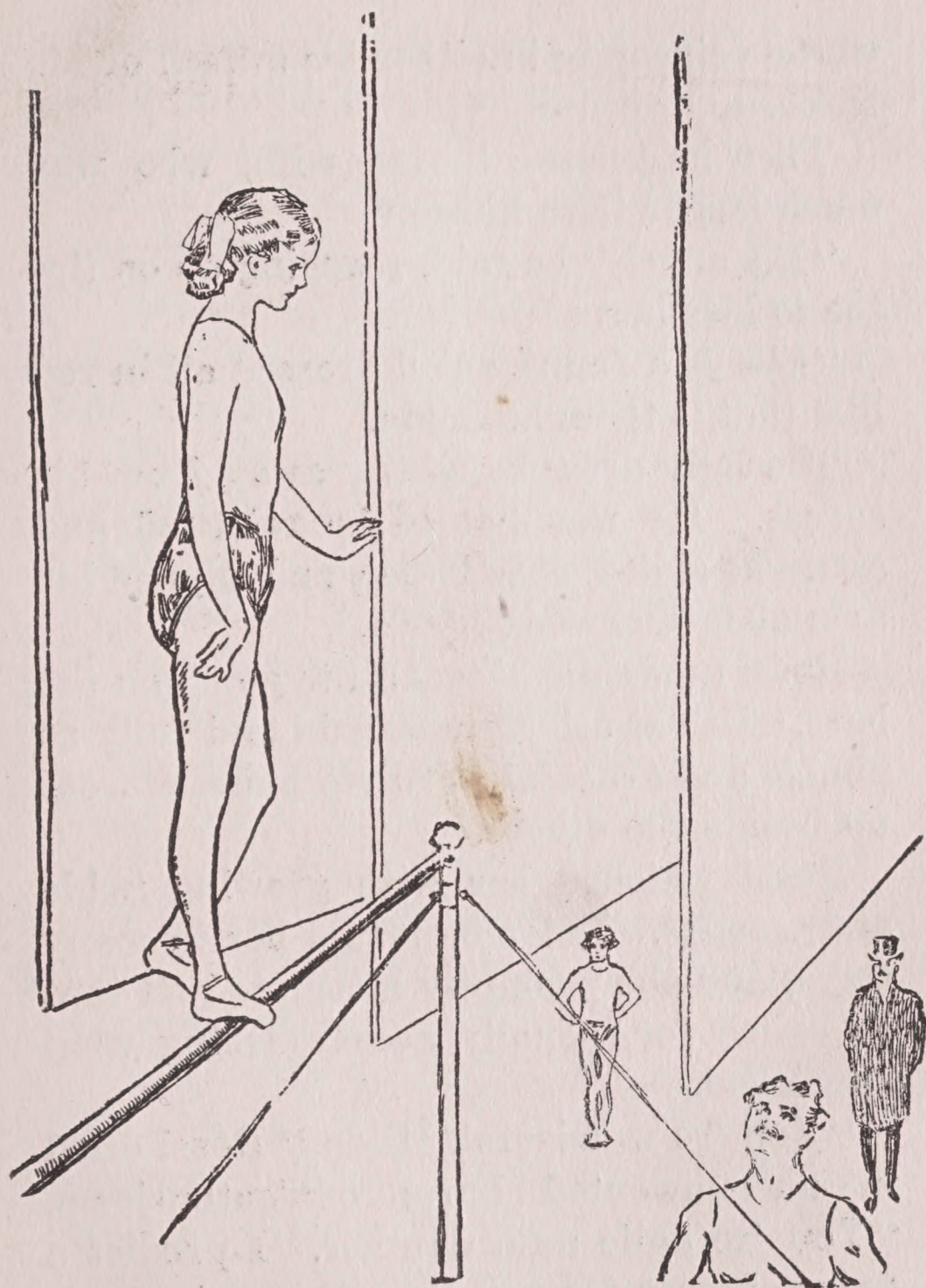
"This is Madame Antoinette Hepp, Hilda. She speaks French."

"Does the little thing speak French also?" asked Madame Hepp, never taking her small, beady, black eyes off Hilda.

"I—I don't believe I 'll like her," thought Hilda.

As soon as all three were ready, they joined Rossi. Silvio was with his father, and also a little Frenchman who proved to be the dark lady's husband. From the first Hilda disliked his manner. She noticed that he never looked her straight in the eye, and while he was speaking he rubbed his hands.

"You 're to be one of us now, so I 'm told, my dear. That is very nice indeed," he said to her, and smiled. Even this did not make Hilda change her opinion. There



was no sincerity in either his speech or his smile.

Then he turned to his wife, who was much larger than himself.

“My angel,” he said, reaching up on tip-toe to kiss her.

“She ’s a funny angel dressed all in red like that,” thought Hilda.

The lady drew haughtily away from his caress. He was not to be rebuffed and again he sidled close to her, and slipped his arm about her waist.

Rossi now called them all to go up on the bars. Hilda, utterly unafraid and fully as nimble and graceful as Silvio himself, went up beside the others.

Rossi watched her with growing pride and wonder. Later he tested her in many ways, and she promptly attempted all that he called for, usually accomplishing what he wished.

“You ’re wonderful, Hilda,” Rossi cried in an unwonted burst of enthusiasm. “You ’re agile as a panther. I predict a great success for you.”

Silvio overheard and looked glum.

"Father," he said later, "I don't believe Hilda 'll ever make a success as an acrobat. She—"

Rossi turned his dark, flashing eyes angrily on his son.

"Shame on you, Silvio, I hope you 're not jealous. Hilda learns even quicker than you did. Why do you talk so?"

"She should n't be an acrobat," Silvio declared doggedly.

This aroused Rossi to new ire. He tried to get Silvio to acknowledge Hilda's ability, but to no avail. Rossi, in a towering rage, finally turned and left him.

"My was n't he mad," Silvio chuckled. "Well, he 'll be worse soon, but it serves him right for being so down on music."

On Saturday afternoon, Silvio escorted Hilda to the Hippodrome, and seated her near the back of the house.

"I 'll hurry as fast as I can," he said. "No encores for me to-day—I 'll bungle if necessary. Have your wraps on and don't keep me waiting a second."

Hilda was deeply interested now in the coming performance of her friends. In

among the audience thus, it did not seem possible that she herself, would shortly make her appearance on the great stage.

“Suppose I fail?” she thought fearfully.

In a daze, she listened to the orchestra. Even the first spectacle held her attention only slightly. Her mind was full of “our act,” as she now termed Salvatore Rossi’s troupe.

When they appeared, she was greatly pleased with the applause they received.

“But they deserve it,” she thought proudly.

She leaned far forward. Their skill made her more fearful of failure for herself.

“I want to be a credit to them,” she sighed, “but oh, would n’t it be nice if Silvio could be a violinist, and I could sing! We ’d be so much happier.”

As Silvio predicted, the Rossi troupe gave no encores that day. The next act was hurried on in spite of the dissatisfaction of the audience.

In an incredibly short time, Hilda saw the eager, handsome Silvio coming toward

her. She ran to meet him, and in a moment more was walking rapidly out into the street with him.

"Hilda, we must hurry," he urged, as if they were not almost running already. Grasping her by the arm, he marched her to a car so fast that it took her breath away.

"We 've missed the overture and some of the singing anyway," he said, as he dropped down on the seat beside her.

"Overture? Singing? Where are we going?"

Silvio smiled. "You 'll know soon." He fumbled inside his coat and shyly pulled out a dainty package rolled in tissue paper.

"I—I thought you 'd like to wear some flowers," he stammered.

She eagerly removed the tissue paper. "Violets! Oh, how sweet!" she exclaimed, so delighted that he did not regret the extravagant price he had paid.

"Thank you, thank you ever so much, Silvio. No one ever gave me flowers before, and I do love them so."

He was too bashful to answer. It was

his first gift to a girl, and as he silently watched her pin the violets on her coat, it made him feel quite grown up."

"Here we are," he cried, hurrying her from the car. Before them was a big building into which Silvio led her.

"I could n't afford seats downstairs, but we can hear just as well up above. You don't mind, do you?" he asked anxiously.

"Indeed I don't mind," she replied with beaming face.

After presenting his tickets, Silvio again grasped Hilda by the arm, and began racing upstairs.

"I 'm afraid we 've missed more than I thought," he said at the first upstairs foyer. "There 's no music so it must be between acts."

"Acts?" questioned Hilda. Her only idea of a musical entertainment was a concert. "I thought they only had acts in places like the Hippodrome."

He was inclined to laugh at her ignorance. The next instant he was delighted because he was about to reveal a new world of delight to her.

"I can't explain now," and on they flew, their training making them unmindful of the climb.

"We are up pretty high," he commented at the topmost landing, "but then all good things are up, not down."

He was perfectly familiar with his surroundings, and led Hilda through an opening. Then an usher conducted them down a steep incline to their seats.

"It 's as I feared. We 've missed an act," whispered Silvio.

Hilda was overpowered by the immensity of the building. True she had just come from the Hippodrome, but never before had she been where she could look down on all the people.

"Hurry and get your wraps off, so 's to be ready for the second act," whispered Silvio.

Hardly was she seated before the orchestra took up the theme, and the curtain rose.

At first Hilda was confused by so many people on the stage all singing at once. She

wondered why they were there, and what they were doing.

Then a new lady came on the stage and began to sing.

“Silvio,” gasped Hilda, seizing his hand convulsively, and so excited that she could hardly control her voice, “Who is she? *Who is she?*”

He pressed her hand reassuringly, looking back into her wonderstruck eyes almost excited as she.

“Don’t you know, Hilda?”

“It ’s Madame Von Arnim’s voice, but she does n’t look like her.”

Silvio smiled, well pleased. “She ’s made up for the part.”

“It ’s Madame Von Arnim then,” she ejaculated hysterically.

There was no time to say another word. Both the girl and boy were held spell-bound by Madame Von Arnim’s singing. In all that vast audience, she did not have two more enthusiastic worshippers.

Not once in Madame Von Arnim’s triumphant career, had she received a more wonderful ovation than followed the end

of that song. The audience would not let the performance go on and brought the great contralto to the front of the stage time and time again.

Hilda was in an ecstasy of delight. She wanted to stand up and huzza as Silvio did. She clapped so hard that she almost believed her famous friend must be conscious of her presence. For Madame Von Arnim, bowing and smiling, looked up at the gallery directly at her as it seemed. Hilda's heart stopped beating for a few seconds.

This was the most exciting moment of the afternoon, although Hilda enjoyed every instant.

Between acts she tried to thank Silvio, but her enthusiasm was so great that she felt her words were most inadequate.

At the final fall of the curtain, Hilda's heart sank. Then Silvio said something that made her blood bound more wildly than ever.

"Now we 're going to see Madame Von Arnim. I found out where she 's stopping, and I 'm going to take you to her, Hilda."

She was too startled to utter a word.

Then he hurried her downstairs and outside.

“We ’ll walk; the hotel is near,” he said.

“She—she may have forgotten me,” faltered Hilda.

“I don’t believe so, Hilda, if Madame Von Arnim helps you to be a singer, I ’m bound some day to be a violinist. I ’ll learn more how to compose and I ’ll write a great opera for you.”

“Oh how grand that ’ll be, Silvio,” she cried.

With childish enthusiasm they pictured their future to each other in roseate hues.

“Father ’ll never forgive me, I know, but I don’t care,” said Silvio. “Your voice must be cultivated. You ’ll be as great a singer as Madame Von Arnim.”

“Silvio, you can’t mean that,” she gasped.

“If I did n’t think so, I would n’t be helping you. I hate to have you go away from us.”

“How good you are to me,” she murmured, her eyes moist.

His encouragement made her hopeful.

At the hotel, however, she experienced a reaction.

"I—I believe I 'm scared," she whispered. "We—we 'd better give up trying to see her."

"Oh nonsense," he answered. "Come on," and he marched boldly up to the office desk, Hilda timidly following.

Then he spoke to the clerk in English, and Hilda could not understand.

The minute Silvio turned around, Hilda knew that something was wrong.

"Madame Von Arnim 's gone."

"Gone?" repeated Hilda blankly.

"Yes, the clerk said she had given up her rooms, and was starting off immediately after the opera on a short concert tour."

Suddenly some of the brightness returned to his face. "We 'll try again when she comes back, and I 'm glad that you and I are to be together awhile longer, Hilda."

She smiled bravely back at him. To just miss Madame Von Arnim was one of the greatest disappointments in her life. Still she was glad, like Silvio, that he and she were not to be immediately separated.

CHAPTER XIII

THE NEW ACT



THE great night when Hilda was to make her bow to the public had arrived. With a red cloak drawn closely around her, she stood with the Rossi troupe in the wings of the Hippodrome.

Her cheeks were scarlet, but the rest of her face was whiter than usual. The pupils of her eyes were expanded to the utmost. Otherwise she was outwardly calm, but inwardly fear possessed her.

Silvio held her hand, and that calmed her a little. Even he did not realize how greatly she needed encouragement. She had done such wonderful work at rehearsals that he never dreamed of stage fright at the critical moment. Still he unconsciously reassured her. He was proud of her and did not hesitate to say so.

“Hilda,” he whispered, “if you did n’t know how to do one single thing, the people ’d like you, because you look prettier than I ever saw you to-night. They won’t expect much from such a little thing, and then when you show them how expert you are, they ’ll be wild over you. They ’re sure to think you great.”

“I—I ’ll try to do my best,” she faltered.

The principals, the great chorus and the clowns now began marching off. Then the stage was emptied, the music ceased momentarily while the bars were being put up.

To add to Hilda’s terror, she noticed the stage people were clustering in the wings waiting with unwonted interest for the appearance of the little novice, who, by her daring at rehearsals had already won the admiration of many.

One clown, alone, noted Hilda’s fright. He often had made her laugh by his antics, and now hoping to reassure her, he twisted his face into a grimace that had always

amused her. But now it had the opposite effect. It made her feel like crying.

"That 's the way people 'll look if I fail," she thought miserably.

"Dear little Hilda," said Rossi, turning to her, and speaking more tenderly than he ever had, "I expect to be very proud of you to-night. I know you 'll not disappoint me."

At this instant the stage was flooded with light. Silvio let go of Hilda's hand. The music struck up. Rossi and Silvio all in white started forward. Hepp helped his wife off with her coat. Leonora threw hers off. Hilda was suddenly so terrified that she forgot to remove hers.

In a moment more keeping close to the others, she found herself out near the front of the enormous stage. Her head was in such a whirl and the lights so blinded her that unconsciously she turned from them, but began to bow as she had been taught.

Immediately the great audience laughed.

Silvio caught Hilda by the arm, turning her in the right direction.

“Throw some kisses to them,” he implored.

Obediently she began wafting kisses to right and left. This was the beginning of her conquest.



“What a dear, sweet mite,” thought some of the spectators, while others compared her to “Little Red Riding Hood.” They all applauded her and that embarrassed her more and more.

Silvio unfastened her cloak and quickly carried it to the wings.

In her white silk tights Hilda looked smaller than ever. She was so dainty, so fairy-like that from the first the audience found the dear, wee child so attractive that they loved her without expecting much from her in an artistic way.

Silvio, rejoining her, whispered, “Now we must go on with our act.”

“I—I can’t,” she faltered.

“Father, she ’s scared,” whispered Silvio to Rossi.

Rossi gave Hilda one quick glance. Then with happy inspiration, he seized both Hilda and Silvio and swung them up by his sinewy, strong arms to his shoulders. He stepped forward with them and bowed.

While the audience applauded, he

pressed his cheek close to the little face nestling near him for protection.

"My dear," he murmured, "I 'm very proud of you."

"Proud of me?" she repeated blankly. "I was afraid I 'd disgraced you."

"No indeed. You 've won their hearts. You have nothing to fear," and with a swing he quietly landed both children on their feet. Though he spoke so confidently he was nervous. In addition to the novelty of Hilda's debut, he was intending an experiment with the public which he had placed at the very beginning of their act.

"If it 's a failure, we can win back favor by our usual work," he had said to Silvio. So he with Silvio and Hilda, quickly ascended to the trapeze.

The audience already expected something unusual. They noticed that the net was not in place.

Rossi lowered two long white streamers. Then with slow grace he wound himself about a third of the distance down these. Silvio followed, poising airily within a few

feet of his father. Next Hilda slid to her place.

The three white-robed figures floating with such ease in mid-air, reminded the spectators of Greek statues and that illusion was heightened, when with chaste, harmonious movements the performers melted from one faultless grouping to another.

This experiment of Rossi's was the first time aerial posing was performed in America. Its success was unbounded. Everyone was wildly enthusiastic. The skill of the performers seemed all the more marvelous because of the smallness and evident youthfulness of Silvio and Hilda.

When the three finally descended to the stage, a wild burst of approval followed. It was so loud and prolonged that it almost scared Hilda. To Rossi no music could have been as sweet.

"Our fortune is made," he murmured enthusiastically to Hilda.

Time and again they had to acknowledge the plaudits of the people.

The net was quickly placed. Even yet

the audience were loath to let the enthusiasm subside.

Hilda's success during the rest of the act was remarkable.

Her trapeze work elicited unstinted admiration. Her youthfulness, her grace, her fearlessness, combined with unusual agility caused delighted comment.

At the end of the act, Rossi carried her off in triumph on his shoulder. Outside the wings he pressed her close to his heart, kissing her in the exuberance of his joy.

"Hilda you 've a great future before you."

Silvio danced around in unfeigned happiness.

"I knew she could n't fail. I knew it."

"My dear son," Rossi exclaimed tremulously, "now you 're your own sweet self. Thank God," he added. "Silvio's jealousy did not last long."

Leonora, too, was mightily delighted.

"My angel," whispered Hepp to his wife, "she 's made a hit sure enough."

"Yes, and we must keep our eyes open. We 'll not be in it if we 're not careful."

"She 'll make a fortune for Rossi," muttered Hepp enviously.

"We must get on the right side of her. No telling what may happen."

So they, too, expressed admiration. Seemingly they were greatly pleased.

Both Hilda and Silvio felt very much grown up that night, for Rossi took them with Leonora and the Hepps out to supper.

As the climax of the evening, Rossi upon reaching home, handed Hilda a roll of dollar bills.

"I cannot afford to pay you much at first," he said, "but from now on, you shall have this same sum every week."

"Not for my very, very own?" she gasped. "Not to spend just as I like?"

Assured that the money was hers to do with as she pleased, Hilda seized Rossi's hand and kissed it.

"Oh, how good you are to me," she cried.

"Good night, dear child," and Rossi left the room.

Hilda turned to Silvio, who was still standing beside her.

“Just to think that this money is all my very own.”

“You ’ll make many times that amount before long,” answered Silvio confidently.

“That ’s too good to be true. This is the happiest night of my life.”

“Don’t be so glad that you ’ll want to give up being a singer.”

“Being an acrobat is pretty good after all. It ’s lovely making so very, very much.”

Silvio began to fear she might be mercenary. His opinion would have been very different had he seen a letter that Hilda wrote. This is what she said:

“My dear, dear Mrs. Mortimer:

“I ’m earning money now, and I ’m so happy to send you most of it—I saved out just a little for mother and Annette.

“Silvio—he ’s the boy I wrote about—says before very long I ’ll be making lots more. When I make enough, will you come and live with me?

“I love you with all my heart and would give anything to see you.

“Your Own Loving

“HILDA.”

Next morning the press agent of the Hippodrome came early to see Rossi.

“We ’ve got to rush Hilda around to the photographer’s, Rossi,” he said.

“Hilda to the photographer’s?” Rossi repeated.

“Why yes, man. Have n’t you seen the morning’s papers? They ’re all full of Hilda’s success. So we must make her the rage. We ’ll give her big headlines. I ’ll send her pictures to all the papers—we ’d better have one of her and Silvio together. I ’ve planned out a number of stories about her already. She ’ll be famous in no time. I ’ll wager that within a week you ’ll get a big raise in salary. Shall we call her Hilda in our press work?”

Rossi shook his head. He was unprepared for so much fame for Hilda at first. American ways sometimes startled him. Nonetheless he was delighted.

“No, we ’ll not call her Hilda,” he answered. “Let me see—we ’d better have an Italian name—something appropriate to go with Silvio—Sylvia.”

“Silvio and Sylvia. That ’s all right. Well, now I ’ll have a talk with Sylvia.”

Rossi turned indignantly. “See here, I ’ll not have you filling her head with a lot of nonsense. One of her greatest charms is her unaffectedness. I ’ll not run any risks of her being spoiled. I ’ll not let her know why we ’re taking her to the photographer’s. I ’ll keep press notices from her. I ’ll do all in my power to keep her unspoiled.”

“A fine idea that,” interrupted the press agent, taking out his note book and jotting down something. “I ’ll write up how particular you are. I ’ll say that no convent-bred girl could be more innocent than she. We ’ll harp on her innocence. It may catch on with the religiously inclined, and that ’ll be a great feather in our cap. I ’ll ’phone you what time you ’re to have Sylvia at the photographers.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE OILY MR. HEPP



HE following week when Rossi paid Hilda, he handed her just double the amount he had given her seven days before. She could hardly believe that he meant so much money for her.

"Mr. Rossi, you 've made a mistake," she cried. "There's twenty dollars here instead of ten."

"I know it, Hilda dear. You 're worth more to me now."

"You should n't give me so much. You 're too good to me, Mr. Rossi."

Her gratitude made him ashamed, not that he had any wish to defraud her.

"If I gave her what she 's worth, it would turn her head," he thought. "I 'll make it up to her somehow."

That night Antoinette Hepp had a talk

with her husband. A look of cupidity shone in the beady eyes.

“We ’ve got to get her some way,” she concluded. “There ’s a fortune in it for us.”

“My angel, I ’ll do the best I can,” agreed Hepp.

The next afternoon, when Leonora and Hilda came down to the stage door ready to return home, no Silvio awaited them as usual.

“We ’ll not stop for him! I ’m in a hurry,” said Leonora.

“If you don’t mind, I ’ll wait.”

So Hilda was left by the stage door alone. A moment later Hepp sidled up to her.

“Ah, Hilda,” he began with his oily tone and smile, “I ’ve been waiting to catch you alone. Come up to my dressing room. My wife ’s there. We want to talk to you.”

Hilda shook her head. “Thank you, but I can’t go. Mr. Rossi never lets me go to anyone’s dressing room.”

“What nonsense,” Hepp muttered,

frowning. "Are you always going to be bossed by Rossi?"

"Mr. Rossi has been good to me," she answered simply.

"Good to you?" he demanded with a sneer. "I 'll bet you a dollar he does n't give you half what you 're worth. How much does he pay you?"

Hilda's eyes flashed. She knew from Silvio that Mr. Rossi had picked the Hepps up in France, and was paying them more than double what they had made there. She thought Hepp very ungrateful.

"You don't know what you 're talking about," she answered in great indignation. "The very first night, Mr. Rossi gave me ten dollars, and last night of his own accord, he raised it to twenty."

"Twenty dollars?" repeated Hepp scornfully.

She mistook his scorn for wonder. "Yes, now you see how good he is to me."

"I see that he knows how to fool you. Eh," he exclaimed derisively. "I 'll not let him deceive you any longer. I—"

“You shan’t talk against Mr. Rossi to me. I ’ll not listen.”

“Don’t be so hot, Hilda. Facts are not slander. I ’m only going to tell you the truth.”

“I don’t want to know anything against Mr. Rossi,” and she turned to leave.

Hepp sprang in front of her.

“Don’t be huffy, Hilda. I ’m only telling you for your own good, and if you really believe in Rossi, the truth can’t hurt him.”

“That ’s so. But how am I to know that you will speak the truth?”

“You can ask anyone if what I say is n’t so. Since you appeared, Rossi has had a raise of two hundred dollars a week. So do you think it fair for you to only get twenty? I don’t.”

“I—I don’t believe I ’m worth more to Mr. Rossi,” Hilda stammered, so overwhelmed by Hepp’s figures that she hardly knew what to say,” and anyway he took me before he knew I ’d be worth anything.”

“That ’s nothing. I ’d have taken you

myself, and, without saying a word against Rossi, I 'll tell you how to make more than you do. You 'd like more money, I know, and you shall have it. When our Hippodrome engagement is over, my wife and I are going to start out on our own account."

Hilda knew instinctively that such an action was dishonorable and she disliked Hepp more than ever.

"Did n't Mr. Rossi bring you to America?" she cried accusingly.

"Yes," he answered, a little shamefaced, though his cupidity promptly overcame any nobler sentiment. "But I 've got to look out for our interest. It 's everyone's duty to do that, and if you 'll come with Antoinette and me, I 'll make a fortune for you, too."

"I—go with you?" For a moment she was stunned.

"Yes," continued Hepp persuasively. "Let me see—you say you get twenty dollars, well—but how about your board?"

"I stay with Mr. Rossi," she answered, hardly realizing that she was being bribed.

"All right," agreed Hepp, "you can

stay with Antoinette and me—we 'll treat you like our own child—and you shall have thirty dollars.”

“I 'll not go with you. I 'll stay with my friends, as you ought to do,” she cried.

To herself she said, “I 'll tell Mr. Rossi about this.” The next instant two reasons presented themselves to her loyal mind why she should keep silent. Their act was a dangerous one, she knew. It needed cool heads, and Rossi with his hot, Italian nature, would be terribly wrought up if he learned of Hepp's treachery.

“They could n't perform well together—some accident might happen, and then, too, if I told, Mr. Rossi might think I was after more money. I 'd not have him think that for the world. I 'll not tell,” she decided.

Meanwhile Hepp eyed her cunningly. He believed he had not made the bait sufficiently tempting—his rascality placed a price on everyone.

“I see you 're wiser than you seem,” he resumed. “Very well. If you 'll promise to stay with me for the next five years, I 'll

give you forty dollars and your board. What do you say to that?"

"I—I—" she stammered, her blood boiling. "I 'll stay with Mr. Rossi. He 's been good to me, and I 'm not going back on him now."

"What 's she after now?" wondered Hepp. "Hilda," he said and would have placed his hand on her shoulder had she not shrunk from his touch. He misinterpreted her action.

"Don't fear me. I 'll promise never to whip you, and I 'll not let Antoinette beat you either."

"Whip me! Beat me!" she repeated in amazement.

"Does n't Rossi ever whip you?"

"No, indeed," she cried indignantly.

Hepp looked crestfallen.

"I thought all masters treated their pupils that way," he muttered apologetically. Her look convinced him that common as the custom is, she had never dreamed of such treatment. So, to set himself right with her, he laughingly added, "You thought me in earnest, but it



was just a little joke. Of course I know Rossi would n't whip you."

"Were you joking about leaving Mr. Rossi, too?"

"No, but—"

Hilda again turned to leave.

"Hold on a moment, Hilda. You should n't blame me for wanting you. You 're very wonderful, and if you 'll only come with me, I 'll push you ahead more than Rossi does. Then, too, you would n't have Silvio to take any of the glory from you."

"I love to have people applaud Silvio. I—"

"Don't be a little fool. You ought to think of yourself, but perhaps you 're only working me to see how much I 'm willing to pay. Well, what will you take?"

Her eyes snapped. "No money could take me away from them," she said in low tones, but so emphatically that Hepp had to believe. He was so angry that he caught Hilda by the shoulders, and shook her.

"Let go of her," cried Silvio, who had come within hearing a moment before. He

sprang forward, catching Hepp by the arm.

Hepp was so surprised that he let go of Hilda.

"So you 've been listening," he muttered.

"No I have n't either. I could not help hearing you ask Hilda what she 'd take. I—"

"Here comes Mr. Rossi," warned Hilda. "Silvio, please don't say a word before him."

"Why not?"

"I—I 'll tell you later. Really you must n't say a word before him."

"Hepp," said Rossi as he joined them, "I have some business to talk over with you and your wife. I can't stop now, but you might meet me at the restaurant for dinner. Tell Leonora I 'll not be home," he added to the children.

"Hilda," began Silvio when they were alone, "why was Hepp offering you money?"

"It—it 's nothing at all now, Silvio," faltered Hilda.

“He was up to some mischief. I know it from the way he acted. I think you might tell me.”

“Truly there ’s nothing I can tell, Silvio. And, oh, Silvio, if your father ’s not coming home, we ’ll have a chance to practice a little. Won’t that be lovely?”

This distracted Silvio’s attention from Hepp. One of the greatest pleasures of childhood is the sharing of innocent secrets. During the charmed hours when Rossi was from home, Silvio and Hilda played and sang together. Since their discovery of each others gifts, he had brought home songs, and played the accompaniment for Hilda whenever he could.

Meantime Hepp, after leaving Rossi, hurried back and rejoined his wife.

“She ’ll not come with us,” he cried angrily.

A cruel smile curved Antoinette’s red lips. “I ’d like to get charge of her. I ’d beat some sense into the hussy.”

The wily Frenchman gazed at his wife admiringly. “My angel, I promised her I would n’t let you lay hands on her, but

she 's an impudent little brat, and I only wish you could take her in hand."

"We 'll try being nice to her awhile longer. Maybe we can win her over."

Hepp shook his head doubtfully. "There 's not much hope of that I fear."

"Well, we must try anyway. If we can't get her to go, there 's no use of our leaving."

"Rossi has invited us out to dinner. It 's about time for him to be speaking of plans for next year. Shall we sign with him?"

"In the long run, we may have to, but let 's make a bluff at leaving. That may make him offer us a raise anyway."

CHAPTER XV

BITTER MEMORIES



ROSSI and the Hepps were seated at table waiting for their order.

“I thought it time for us to be getting down to business,” the master of the troupe was saying. “You ’ll be pleased to hear that I ’m very well satisfied with your work. So I brought the papers along with me to-night to have you sign for two years as agreed.”

Hepp looked at his wife. She nodded her head encouragingly.

“Rossi, my dear fellow,” he said, rubbing his hands nervously, “I know you would n’t want to stand in our light. Well, Antoinette and I have been offered more money. We ’d rather stay with you, but we know you would n’t ask us to without raising our salary. We—”



"I did n't expect this from you," interrupted Rossi angrily. "You don't stop to consider all I 've done for you. If—"

"We can't go on living on past favors. We 've got to have more money. We know you 're too generous to stand in our light."

"Go, for all of me," cried Rossi impetuously rising. Grasping his hat and coat, he started angrily away.

"Mr. Rossi, come back. We—"

But their ingratitude had so enraged him that he gave no heed. He rushed out of the door, leaving the Hepps looking blankly at each other.

"What 's to be done now?" cried the man.

"You 'll have to eat humble pie. Then we 've got to get Hilda."

"The ingrates," muttered Rossi as he strode rapidly towards home.

"I 'm well rid of them," he added presently. "The children and I 'll take a vacation this Spring, and run over to Italy. There I can easily pick up another couple as good as they. I want to arrange about that Russian engagement for next winter

anyway," he decided just before reaching home.

As he climbed the stairs to his apartment, a fresh young voice rang out in triumphant song. There was also a violin accompaniment, but Rossi did not dream that it was his son playing.

"I hate music," he said, but he knew that he deceived himself. Tonight the clear young voice awoke memories that would not be stilled. He paused irresolutely on the landing, and a sharp pain pierced his heart.

"So sang Adelaida in her innocent days with me," he thought bitterly. "Oh, if it had n't been for her singing, she would never have run away!"

He rubbed his eyes in angry impatience. "I must n't stand here listening, or I shall be crying like a fool."

So he hurried towards his own apartment, hardening his heart as he went.

Outside the door, he was brought to an abrupt standstill.

"She—she can't have come back," he faltered, cold drops breaking out on his

forehead. For a moment he felt too weak to face the unknown.

“It can’t be Adelaida,” he reassured himself. Then he softly opened the outside door, and noiselessly made his way toward the sitting room. The next moment, the identity of the young songstress came to him like a blow.

“You, Hilda?” he gasped, rushing toward her as if he meant her bodily harm.

Silvio, startled as he was, placed himself between his father and the trembling girl.

“Father,” he cried, “you must n’t hurt Hilda.”

Rossi began to laugh wildly. “Oh, no—not hurt Hilda! I can’t believe it even yet. I ’d never have let her into my house if I ’d known she sang.”

Silvio was assured now that the battle was to be one of words, and he laid his violin with loving care on the table, turned and spoke impetuously to Rossi.

“But Hilda has a wonderful voice. We ought to help her cultivate it. She must be a singer.”

Had his son struck him outright, Rossi could have been no more enraged.

“You—you,” he shrieked too overcome to express himself lucidly. Then the haunting fear of his soul broke from his white lips.

“And you?—Do you still dream that you will be a violinist?”

Hilda, who thus far had been too frightened to say a word now stepped forward beside Silvio.

“Oh, Mr. Rossi,” she cried, “do let him be a violinist. He ’s—”

“Be quiet,” shouted Rossi, his eyes blazing. “I thought your coming to us a blessing, but instead I ’ve been harboring a viper in our home. How dare you set my son up to defy me? God’s curse is on the whole musical tribe. There ’s not one good one in the lot. They ’re all without honor; they break up homes. I ’m heart-broken to find you as bad as the rest,” he cried, sinking into a chair, and covering his eyes with his hands.

Instantly Hilda was beside him, stirred to the soul thus to grieve her dear master.

She timidly put her hand on his shoulder.

“I—I love you, Mr. Rossi. I—I did n’t mean to make you feel badly.”

He looked up at her eagerly. “If you did n’t mean it, promise me never to sing again.”

“She shan’t promise that,” interrupted Silvio. “God gave her the voice, and she must sing.”

“God?” taunted Rossi springing to his feet, and towering threateningly above the two children. “Music is of the Devil I tell you. I wish I had never laid eyes on you,” he added savagely to Hilda.

“Do you want to get rid of me, Mr. Rossi?” she asked sadly. “If you say so, I—I ’ll go. I—I had an offer this afternoon.”

A sudden light broke in on Silvio.

“That ’s what Hepp was offering you money for. He—”

“Hepp?” repeated Rossi grasping Hilda by the shoulder, and peering into her eyes as if he would read her soul.

“Yes, I heard him ask Hilda what she ’d take,” continued Silvio.

“Why did n’t you tell me of this, Hilda?” demanded Rossi harshly.

“I—I was afraid you might be so angry that you could n’t do good work together,” she murmured. “Then I did n’t want you to think I was after more money.”

“He could n’t persuade you to leave me, Hilda?”

“Of course not, Mr. Rossi.”

Rossi’s anger vanished. Her faithfulness stood out in beautiful contrast to the defection of Hepp and his wife.

“Dear little Hilda, can you forgive me?” he cried holding out his arms to her.

She sprang gladly toward him. “There ’s nothing to forgive.”

“Thank God, there ’s one faithful soul in the world,” he murmured gently kissing her. “How much did Hepp offer you?”

“He said if I ’d promise to stay with him five years, he ’d pay me forty dollars and my board.”

“The scheming wretch,” muttered Rossi, again violently angry. “He knew that in five years, time, you ’d be worth very much more than that. Oh, money ’s his god!

Well, my child, you shall not lose by your honesty. I 'll do much better by you than he if you 'll stay with me."

"Of course, I'll stay with you, Mr. Rossi."

He nervously paced up and down the room.

"Her word 's to be trusted," he thought, "but if she were not a minor I 'd bind her by contract. I 'll write to her father. That 's the very thing."

"Hilda," he said stopping in front of her, "I 'm going to write an agreement for your parents to sign before a lawyer. When it comes back to me, you will have to stay with me until you are of age. But to begin with, I 'll pay you fifty dollars, and then raise your salary every six months. Will that satisfy you?"

"Oh, indeed it will, Mr. Rossi! Thank you; thank you so very much!"

"Well I 'll go and have the paper drawn out immediately."

"Hilda!" cried Silvio when they were alone. He was appalled at the situation.

“If Father gets that paper signed, it means that you can never be a singer.”

“I don’t care,” answered Hilda happily. “I think it ’s better for me to be an acrobat. Just think of all the money I can make.”

Silvio was not satisfied, but he felt himself helpless.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LADY IN THE STAGE BOX



HAT night, before the performance, Hepp tried to patch up matters with Rossi.

“Rossi,” he began humbly, “Antoinette and I ’ve talked over our affairs and we ’ve decided to sign if you wish.”

Rossi eyed him coldly.

“After our present engagement is ended, I shall no longer need either of you. I ’m going to Italy this spring, and there I can get new people for much less than I ’m paying you. As you so truly said last night I ’ll ‘not stand in your light.’ In a few weeks now, you ’ll be free for your better chance.”

“But—but—” stammered Hepp.

“There ’s no more to be said,” thundered Rossi.

That the discharge had finally been given eased Rossi's resentment.

Hepp nursed his wrath. He felt even more bitter against Hilda than against Rossi.

"It 's all her fault," he complained to Antoinette, "if she were n't such a fool our fortunes would be made.

"Well, keep your feelings to yourself," snapped Antoinette. "We 've got to win her someway."

"If we don't, I 'll manage to get even with her."

Thereafter the two of them were so smiling outwardly that even Rossi was reassured.

"They don't dare try any more deviltry," he thought.

While waiting for an answer from Hilda's parents, Rossi was restless. After discovering her genius for song, he had an uneasy presentiment that something might happen to snatch her from him.

"Music 's the curse of my life," he thought in agony of spirit. Since he had heard Hilda sing, the past haunted him day

and night. Not only this, but he feared Silvio might leave, too.

“They must stay with me,” he vowed.

One afternoon when Rossi was detained at the theatre, Hilda met him at the door upon his return.

“Here ’s the letter, Mr. Rossi.”

He snatched it from her, and hastily broke it open.

“Thank God,” he murmured, “they ’ve signed. Hilda, you ’re legally bound to me until you ’re of age. Nobody can take you from me,” and he drew her to him, kissing her as he would a daughter. Still keeping his arm around her, he led her toward the dining room.

“Leonora! Silvio!” he called in ringing voice, “Hilda ’s to stay with us.”

Leonora was visibly delighted. Silvio tried not to appear morose.

“And I saw that Madame Von Arnim was coming back soon now,” he thought, “But even that will not help.”

A few days later as Hilda was on the way to her dressing room, she met Hepp.

“Hilda,” he began looking around ap-

prehensively to make sure that no one would overhear, "both my wife and myself have shown you how friendly we are. You must see that you can trust us. I 'll do anything under the sun for you if you 'll only go with us."

"Mr. Hepp, it 's useless your talking to me. My father and mother have signed a paper, and I 'm legally bound to stay with Mr. Rossi until I 'm of age."

He mumbled that fortunately Hilda did not hear. Then he hurried back to his wife.

"It 's of no use. She 'll not go."

"Then we 'll skip. That offer was telegraphed to you just in the nick of time. I'm glad that we 're wanted at once. It 's some consolation to leave Rossi in the lurch."

Later, out on the stage, Hepp's shifty eyes kept themselves fixed on Hilda. Her popularity enraged him anew.

He was the last one to climb up the bars. He purposely planned it so. While the others were going on up, he stealthily loosened a rope of the netting.

"There, if I can only catch her off guard

that may fix her," and then he hastened after the others. No one but Antoinette noticed that he smiled cruelly.

"What mischief is he up to?" she wondered, but there was no time to give the subject another thought. Her work came first on the program. Silvio and Hilda always were reserved for the climax.

When Hilda's turn came, and she had started to swing herself down into Hepp's hands, she chanced to glance below at the audience. Her eye strayed to the first right hand box.

"That lady looks like Mrs. Mortimer!" and the very thought made her turn white. She felt herself trembling nervously.

Hepp noticed, and smiled sardonically.

"Now 's my chance," he said to himself as the unheeding girl entrusted herself to his mercy.

Again Hilda gazed at the box. That instant, Hepp with less force than usual sent her out into the air.

Hilda just missing Rossi, went tumbling downward. Instinctively she took precautionary measures to save herself from



hurt. But as she landed in the net it gave way, and poor Hilda was thrown violently to the floor below.

A shudder went through the audience. Men hastily picked up Hilda and carried her into the wings.

Silvio at the moment of the fall was up beside his father awaiting the great moment when he and Hilda were to have been cast together. He started to rush pell-mell down the rope. Rossi caught hold of him and pulled him back.

"Silvio," he said and his voice trembled, "we 've got to go on as if nothing had happened."

"Go on?" Silvio faltered, "I—I can't. Hilda may be killed. I must go to her."

"Silvio, we must do our duty. The public must not think anything serious has happened."

Silvio never knew how he got through the next few minutes. The ordeal was a cruel one for Rossi and Leonora too, but with heroic fortitude they performed their parts to the end.

"Did you intend that she should fall?"

whispered Antoinette as she and her husband stood a moment alone.


His eyes avoided hers.

“My angel, how can you think such a thing of me.”

“I don’t think; I know,” she answered. And she smiled.

CHAPTER XVII

MRS. MORTIMER PLEADS

OW to account for the appearance of Mrs. Mortimer in the box that afternoon. For Hilda had not been mistaken in thinking it was she.

The police and detectives had been called to aid in the search for Hilda, but to no avail. The last anyone in Cleveland knew of her was the moment she had left her friends to board the car. Had it not been for the letters Hilda sent Mrs. Mortimer, the grief-stricken woman would have been frantic. Even with this proof that she was alive and well, it seemed as if the mystery of her whereabouts never would be solved.

At this point, came Hilda's debut and success. Soon after that her pictures appeared not only in the papers but magazines. One of them chanced to fall into Mrs. Mortimer's hands.

“Hilda’s father was an acrobat,” she exclaimed, “and strange as it seems, this child must be my little Hilda.”

She hurried to New York, in little doubt that her quest was nearly ended.

“But I can’t do anything until I ’m perfectly sure,” she decided. So she selected a box seat at the Hippodrome.

One glance at Hilda assured Mrs. Mortimer that her long lost girl was found. She could hardly wait for the end of the act, so anxious was she to claim Hilda.

“But I must be cautious. Now that Hilda ’s famous, these people may not want to give her up,” she thought with a sudden premonition, and pressed her handkerchief to her eyes.

Then came the accident, and Mrs. Mortimer threw caution to the winds. Her first impulse was to step from the box onto the stage. Instead she hurried to the box office.

“I must go behind the scenes,” she cried.

She explained the situation only briefly but she was so insistent, that she promptly

was conducted back to Hilda, who was just coming to herself.

"I—I must go back," cried Hilda struggling to her feet. Then her eyes fell upon Mrs. Mortimer. "Oh," she gasped, "it was you!"



"Hilda, are you hurt?" cried Mrs. Mortimer, rushing to her and taking her in her arms.

"I—I think I fainted. I struck my head, but I 'm going to be all right now."

“Thank God. I feared you might be killed.”

Silvio, a little in advance of his father and sister, now hurried up.

“Hilda, you ’re alive! You ’re alive!” he cried rapturously.

Rossi without a word took Hilda from Mrs. Mortimer’s arms, and carried her out before the audience. His first thought was to reassure them.

At sight of Hilda, they began to applaud, and applauded even more vigorously than ever they had for her wonderful feats.

Although she was sore and unnerved from her fall, she managed to smile and throw kisses in return. Never had she received a heartier ovation.

“They really like me,” she thought.

Rossi as he strode out with her hugged her close to him.

“If you had been seriously hurt, I don’t know what I would have done. I can’t think how that net gave away. I ’m always most particular. I ’ll have to look into this matter,” he muttered as he set her down.

Mrs. Mortimer joined them.

"Hilda, just listen to them applauding out there still. It 's a glorious end to your acrobatic career," she said, putting her arm lovingly about the girl.

"Who are you, madame?" demanded Rossi forbiddingly.

"I am Mrs. Mortimer. I 've come to claim Hilda."

"I have all legal right to Hilda, and I 'll never give her up," exclaimed the acrobat sternly.

His look more than his words made Mrs. Mortimer realize how bitterly he would oppose all her plans.

"Oh, Hilda," she cried, "why, why did you run away from me?"

"Because you were so poor. Now I 'm going to make heaps of money and you can have it all."

Mrs. Mortimer could not keep back the tears. "You dear, dear child! I do not need money. I only want you."

"But are n't you poor? The teachers said you were," faltered Hilda.

"No, sweetheart, I 'm not as poor as they thought. I offered to give up every penny

I had to pay Mr. Mortimer's creditors, but the mines are already paying them back. A friend took hold of them, and it 's been discovered that they are very valuable. I shall have plenty of money to make you a singer—”

“Hilda shall never be a singer,” interrupted Rossi fiercely.

“Can we not discuss this matter where it is quieter?”

“It is utterly useless. I—”

“But I 'm determined that you shall hear me. I will not be dismissed like this.” Rossi turned abruptly from her. She would have followed him if Silvio had not prevented.

“Mrs. Mortimer,” he called softly. “You want Hilda to be a singer, and so do I. I 'll dress at once and take you home with me. You can talk to father better there.”

Mrs. Mortimer looked into his eager honest eyes, and was pleased with what she read there.

“I believe I can trust you,” she replied. Thus it befell that when Rossi walked in-

to his sitting room a little later he found Mrs. Mortimer and Silvio waiting for him.

"You, Madame?" he exclaimed harshly.

She rose to plead with him.

"I brought Hilda to this country, Mr. Rossi. I have a better right to her than you. I beg of you to let her go with me."

"Never!"

"You are selfish, sir. You ought to think of her good. She—"

"I do think of her good," declared Rossi savagely. "Acrobats, as a rule, grow up good people, but I 'd rather see Hilda dead than have her a singer. They 're all bad, bad."

"No, indeed, they 're not all bad," Mrs. Mortimer answered with spirit. "I wish you knew Madame Von Arnim. She—"

"I 'll not listen. I know what I 'm talking about. Singers have no morality."

"Why are you so bitter Mr. Rossi?"

Looking at his son he thought, "If I don't answer, Silvio will always believe me harsh. I would better let him know the truth."

"Madame," he answered "I 've cause enough, God knows, to be bitter." His eyes

grew dim and his iron will alone kept him from breaking down completely. "I—I adored this boy's mother. I did everything in my power to make her happy, but she—"

"I did not mean to pry into your life," interrupted Mrs. Mortimer gently.

"Father," cried Silvio, "tell me about my mother! Is she alive? Where is she?"

"She—she ran away from us, Silvio, my boy, when you were a baby. Her accursed voice was her ruin. She ran off with a singer in Florence. Now you know why I always fought your playing."

"But, Father, please, please don't let this ruin Hilda's life. If—"

"Don't argue with me, Silvio."

"Silvio is right, Mr. Rossi," urged Mrs. Mortimer. "It will ruin Hilda's life. I love her very dearly and—"

"Don't you think I love her, too?" broke in Rossi. "If you could convince me that it was for her best interest to go with you, I'd let her go. But you can't. As I have the law on my side, I 'll keep her."

After this, although Mrs. Mortimer used every argument, Rossi remained unmoved.

"I have the paper to show my right to her, and I 'll keep her," he declared again and again.

"I shall not give up," answered Mrs. Mortimer in desperation. "I shall consult a lawyer."

"Consult a hundred lawyers," growled Rossi.

At this moment a special messenger arrived with a note for Rossi.

"You would n't give us more money, and so we 've left," Rossi read. "We had an offer providing we 'd go immediately. This may spoil your act at the Hippodrome, but the engagement is almost over anyway, and we 've got to look after our own interests. You would n't keep us."

Rossi did not have to look at the signature.

"Hepp 's a scoundrel," he cried bitterly.

"What 's the matter, father?"

"The Hepps have left us. I must go to the Hippodrome," and he was off almost before they realized what had happened.

"This may be a fortunate thing after all," Rossi said to himself. "Probably I

can't get anyone here to take their place, and in that case they 'll have to engage another act at the Hippodrome. That will leave me free to whisk Hilda off to Italy at once."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE LITTLE KNIGHT



THE following day Silvio went to call on Mrs. Mortimer.

“Father’s going to engage passage on the first boat for Italy. They put another act on at the Hippodrome,” he broke out impetuously. “So we must think of some way for Hilda to stay with you. I can’t bear the thought of parting from her, but she must be a singer. You can help her, can’t you?”

Mrs. Mortimer shook her head helplessly. “I consulted a lawyer last night. He does n’t hold out much hope. But how is Hilda to-day?”

“She ’s rather stiff, but she ’s much better than you ’d expect. I said to her, ‘Hilda, it ’s a wonder you were n’t killed. I don’t see what saved you from death.’

She smiled back at me and answered. 'I think God saved me.' Father declares Hepp was to blame for her fall, but now he 's gone and we never can prove it. But Mrs. Mortimer, what can we do for Hilda?''

"I 'm afraid nothing can be done. I am almost helpless."

Still Silvio would not give up, and day after day, he tried to think of a way for Hilda's release. The first ray of hope came when he read that Madame Von Arnim was to sing at a Saturday matinee at the Metropolitan.

"I must try to have a talk with her. Perhaps she can do something," he said to himself.

He told no one of his plan. On Saturday, however, he hurried to the Metropolitan, and walked around by the stage entrance.

"I never saw her except in opera, but I 'll know her," he thought keeping meantime an eager watch on the approaching carriages.

At first he assured himself that his mission must be successful, and he planned many romantic ways in which the famous

singer was to aid Hilda. Slowly his enthusiasm began to ebb.

“It—it ’ll be awful to have Hilda leave. I must n’t let myself think how I ’ll miss her,” and he walked back and forth so rapidly that he could not have gone much faster on a wager.

“Why does n’t Madame Von Arnim come,” he wondered impatiently. “Suppose she ’s lost interest in Hilda! Actors forget easily and probably singers do, too. Well I ’ll just make Madame Von Arnim listen to me. She must help Hilda.”

This time as he turned, he saw a carriage draw up at the curb. In another moment a lady stepped out on the sidewalk.

Silvio’s heart beat unevenly but he stepped rapidly forward, hat in hand.

“Madame, Madame Von Arnim, I must speak to you.”

“Ach, what a handsome boy,” said Madame Von Arnim to herself, and added, “Why, who are you, my boy?”

“I ’m Silvio, but it ’s about Hilda I must speak to you.”



“Hilda? Hilda?” repeated Madame Von Arnim. “Who is she?”

“She ’s forgotten,” and Silvio’s heart sank.

“Oh, you must remember Hilda,” he exclaimed looking at her with all his heart in his eyes. “She ’s the little girl who sang for you last autumn and you said she had a wonderful voice; that she ’d be a great singer some day. Don’t you remember Hilda now, Madame?”

To Silvio’s joy her face lighted in glad recollection.

“Do you mean Mrs. Mortimer’s Hilda?”

“Yes, yes, but she ’s not with her now.”

“So Mrs. Mortimer wrote me. I felt very sorry—very sorry indeed. But—what did you say your name was—Silvio?—A poetical name that. Silvio, do you know where my little singing girl is?”

“Yes, she ’s with us. Madame Von Arnim, she ’s in trouble. You must make father let her be a singer. You will, won’t you?”

Even if Madame Von Arnim had not

been interested in Hilda, Silvio's personality would have won her to his cause.

She smiled reassuringly. "I don't understand what you want of me, Silvio, and I 've no time to learn now. But if you will wait until after the opera I 'd like to help you if I can."

With gallantry learned from his courtly old grandfather, Silvio seized her hand, and pressed it to his lips.

"You 're so good, Madame, so very good," he murmured. His heart was completely won and his hopes were high.

"Father can't help seeing she 's a good woman. She 'll win him surely."

On her side Madame Von Arnim liked Silvio more than ever.

"He 's a perfect little knight," and in her mind she dubbed him Sir Silvio.

"Silvio," she asked, "would you like to hear me sing this afternoon? If you would I 'll send some one around to pass you inside."

He blushed. "Oh thank you, thank you so much, Madame, but—"

“Possibly you don’t care for music?” she interrupted.

“Not care for music?” repeated her little knight his eyes shining, “I adore music. I heard you sing one afternoon, Madame, and your voice was heavenly. I ’d love to hear you, but—”

“Not another word, Silvio,” and she was gone before he knew what she intended.

“I did n’t want her to think I was looking for a free ticket,” he said.

A few moments later a man came for Silvio.

“Not many singers would take so much trouble for a strange boy,” he thought while the man was conducting him to the front of the house. “Of course she did it for Hilda. Still I hope she likes me, too. I love her.”

When they were inside, the man led him to one of the best boxes in the house.

“But—but I ’m not to sit here?” stammered Silvio.

“Yes, you are. Madame Von Arnim saved this box for her daughter, and she says that you are to sit here with her.

She 'll send for you both after the performance. Go in and take a front seat."

"Oh, if Hilda were only here," Silvio sighed as he seated himself.

He glanced far above where Hilda and he had sat on another afternoon and all their fond hopes of a musical career revived within him.

"Yes, if Hilda 's a singer, I 'll be a violinist," he decided again, and the painful thought of losing her was conquered by this resolution.

At this moment, a dark, eager-eyed girl swept into the box. At sight of a stranger, she hesitated for an instant then started to seat herself directly behind Silvio.

"Please sit here in front," he said, rising.

"Don't move," she answered graciously. "I 'll sit beside you," and she took the chair next to his.

Silvio felt a little bashful, but he had eyes for the fact that the girl was very attractive and that she was dressed in red, and wore a large picture hat which made the glowing face below more beautiful.

"Why I know who you are," she exclaimed, having returned his scrutiny. "Are n't you with the Rossi troupe at the Hippodrome?"

"Yes, I 'm Silvio Rossi," he answered shyly.

"I'm so glad to meet you. I 'm Frieda Von Arnim. I go to a boarding-school here in New York, and all the girls are wild over you and your father and the little girl with you," confided Frieda.

"That's Hilda. Your mother has promised to help me about Hilda. That 's why I 'm here."

"My mother?" repeated Frieda wonderingly. "Please tell me more about Hilda."

But the curtain rose. "We 'll have to wait until between acts," whispered Frieda.

At Madame Von Arnim's entrance, Silvio was so excited that without thinking, he sprang to his feet and clapped so long and so vigorously that his hands smarted, hardened though they were by exercise.

Madame Von Arnim turned and smiled

at Frieda. Then Silvio attracted her attention.

"My little knight is enthusiastic," she thought, bowing directly to him, and that made him the proudest boy in all New York.

"What will Hilda say to that I wonder?" he thought, his face radiant with joy.

In all that vast audience, he was Madame Von Arnim's most rapturous listener. He would have liked to shower roses and jewels at her feet.

"Your mother is the most wonderful person in the world," he exclaimed at the end of the act.

"Oh she 's just a singer," answered Frieda indifferently. "I think it more wonderful to be a fine acrobat like you."

"More wonderful to be an acrobat!" gasped Silvio.

"Yes, indeed. Mother and father want me to be a singer, but I 'd much rather be an acrobat like you. When I was a little girl, I went to the circus. Then my ambition was to be a bareback rider, but what you do is much finer than that."

“Oh, no, it ’s not. I ’d a hundred times rather sing, like your mother.”

Frieda laughed. “You think of my mother just as I do of your father. He ’s the most marvelous man I ever saw. I ’ve been to see you all time and again. My, but won’t the girls at school be envious when I tell them about meeting you! We try to do some of the things you do, but we don’t succeed very well. But I want to hear about Hilda. You promised to tell me about her.”

So Silvio started to repeat Hilda’s history.

“I remember that mother gave me a doll last Fall that was named Hilda,” interrupted Frieda. “I was very much interested in the little singing girl then, and is n’t it strange that I should be hearing about her from you?”

Thereafter they spent every minute between acts in talking about Hilda.

“I should n’t think she ’d want to give up being an acrobat,” exclaimed Frieda. “You ’re very fond of Hilda, are n’t you, Silvio?”

He nodded his head.

“Why do you want her to be a singer then, and leave you?”

“Because her voice is so wonderful.”

“Well I don’t see how she can want to leave you and Mr. Rossi. Still if both you and she wish it, I suppose it must be arranged. I shall go with you and mother to talk to Mr. Rossi. I ’m dying to meet him anyway.”

Thus it was that when Madame Von Arnim finally came out to her carriage, she found Frieda in a very excited state of mind.

“Mother,” she exclaimed, “we must drive immediately around to see Hilda. I ’ve heard all about her from Silvio, and we must help her be a singer.”

“Frieda,” Madame Von Arnim replied as she stepped into the carriage, “I think perhaps we ’d better drop you at your school and—”

“No indeed, Mother. I ’m going with you and Silvio.”

Madame Von Arnim smiled at her im-

petuosity. "And pray where are we all going?"

Frieda turned to Silvio. "Tell the driver where you live. Have him take us there."

"I seem to have no voice in the matter," but Madame Von Arnim did not appear displeased.

"Shall I do as she says Madame?"

"I suppose so, Silvio. I spoil her terribly."

"Now," said Madame Von Arnim after the directions had been given, "would you mind telling me what I am expected to do?"

"Madame, I do so want you to help Hilda be a singer. I'll tell you all about her gift now, and you 'll help her, won't you?"

"Yes, Silvio. You are a singer, yourself, I suppose."

"No, Madame, I—I—"

"He 's Silvio Rossi, the acrobat, mother."

"An acrobat?" thought Madame Von Arnim with disappointment. "If there 's

anything in a face, that boy has missed his vocation."

Silvio's profession put a different phase on Frieda's going with them.

"She has too many foolish notions about acrobats in her head already," Madame Von Arnim said to herself.

Meantime Silvio had begun telling Hilda's story, and Madame Von Arnim quickly grew so interested that she decided to let Frieda stay.

"Frieda's too sensible about most things to have her head turned by this experience. And she's so interested that if I sent her away now she'd never forgive me," wisely thought Madame Von Arnim, "and too, she may be of some help in outwitting Mr. Rossi. Law or no law, he must do as we all wish about Hilda."

CHAPTER XIX

JUST A SONG AT TWILIGHT



SOMETHING had been on Hilda's mind for a long time. She had come into the sitting room where Mr. Rossi was fully intending to speak to him about it, but her courage failing, she had seated herself on the lounge. There she fell to thinking of Mrs. Mortimer.

"What makes you so quiet, Hilda?" asked Rossi, sitting down beside her.

Hilda tried to brush a tear from her face without his seeing.

"Why Hilda, you 're crying. What 's the trouble?"

"It 's because I 'll not see much of Mrs. Mortimer before—" The thought of the separation was too much for Hilda and she broke down completely.

Rossi was genuinely distressed. Hilda

had never let him see before how much Mrs. Mortimer really meant to her.

"Don't cry, dear," he said gently. His conscience accused him.

"They love each other, and I took her away wrongfully."

Self-justification retaliated, "Yes, but I have been good to her. I have as much right to her now as Mrs. Mortimer has; more, for not only the law, but her good, demands that she stay with me."

To Hilda he said, "My dear, you know I love you and that I would n't do anything I did n't believe was for your good. You do believe that, don't you?"

"Yes, Mr. Rossi," she sobbed.

"Then you should n't cry and feel badly."

"I—I can't help it, Mr. Rossi. I love you, but Mrs. Mortimer needs me. I should n't have left her. She 's all alone in the world. Only think, her baby died, and just as I was beginning to be a comfort, I—I ran away. I wish you would let me go back to her." She put out her hand timidly to him. He took it and pressed it. His grip,

that was usually like iron, was now gentle as a woman's. He drew her closer.

"Hilda, I can't give you up now. I need you and I can't bear to have you unhappy. So please stop crying."

"I 'll stop, Mr. Rossi. I—I 'll do just as you say about everything."

Her patience and her desire to please, touched him deeply. He bent over and kissed her.

"You are as dear to me as an own child," he murmured. "I 'll try to make you glad to stay with me."

"If it were n't for Mrs. Mortimer and singing, I 'd be happy to stay."

At her mention of singing, Rossi's face darkened, but in the gathering twilight Hilda did not catch his expression.

"Mr. Rossi, before you decide to keep me, I ought to tell you something. I came in here to speak about it, but I was afraid you would n't like it."

She spoke so seriously that he looked up startled.

"What 's the matter, Hilda?"

"My clothes are getting too small for me."

Rossi smiled. "Why does n't Leonora buy you some new ones?"

"It—it 's not that. I 'm growing fast and you 'll not like that, but I can't help it. If I 'm large, you won't have any more use for me. Leonora says it 's because this country is doing me good and that I may shoot up all of a sudden."

This news was unpleasant to Rossi, but he loved honest Hilda more than ever.

"No matter, dear. I 'll always have a place for you. Little or big, you stay with me just the same."

The outer door rattled, and a moment afterwards Silvio, with Madame Von Arnim and Frieda, came into the sitting room.

Hilda sprang to her feet. She feared that she must be dreaming.

"Madame Von Arnim," she gasped, and trembling from her wondrous delight, she flew to her and was folded in a motherly embrace.

"Who can these people be" wondered Rossi, and started to withdraw.

He had not reached the middle of the room when Silvio caught him by the hand.

"Father, don't go. This young lady is most anxious to meet you."

"Anxious to meet me?" repeated Rossi in surprise.

"Yes, Father. This is Miss Frieda Von Arnim."

The name did not enlighten Rossi. He automatically extended his hand.

"Mr. Rossi, meeting you is a great happiness. I 'd give anything to be a great acrobat like you. There are lots of questions I want to ask you," and she pressed his hand cordially.

Though she spoke in rather stilted, school-girl fashion, she was so evidently sincere in her admiration that Rossi was pleased.

"I 'll be glad to answer them if I can."

Madame Von Arnim turned a smiling face upon him.

"You are Frieda's hero, Mr. Rossi. I 've

heard her talk so much about you that I feel as if we already were acquainted."

The situation was still a mystery to him. He had no idea that a singer was in the room with him. If he had, he would not have stayed. As it was, Madame Von Arnim began to talk to him with great tact. She knew how to draw out the best side of his nature, and he said to himself, "Whoever she is, she 's a wonderful woman."

Meanwhile Hilda and Frieda were becoming acquainted. Fortunately Frieda could speak French and was not in the least embarrassed, so that Hilda was immediately placed at her ease.

"Would you really and truly rather be a singer, Hilda?" asked Frieda. "Silvio said so, but it does n't seem possible. If I were in your place, I 'd rather be with Mr. Rossi and Silvio."

Silvio standing beside the two girls waited anxiously for Hilda's reply.

"If it were n't for Mrs. Mortimer, I would n't want to leave them—not even to be a singer," she answered softly.

Silvio leaned over and gave her hand a quick squeeze. "Hilda," he whispered, "Madame Von Arnim has promised to help you."

"What 's she going to do?"

Silvio could not answer. Just then Madame Von Arnim herself could not have given a satisfactory reply. She was trying to reach the soft spot in Rossi's heart but thus far she had failed to find it.

"I shall have to wait," she decided. "Perhaps fate will help me."

"Mr. Rossi," she said, "I want your advice about my daughter. Frieda has a foolish notion that she wants to be an acrobat, but she is fitted to follow in my footsteps."

"To follow in your footsteps?"

"Why yes, didn't you know? I 'm Madame Von Arnim, the singer."

"You, a singer?"

"You say that as if it were something very bad. But really Mr. Rossi, I 'm just like other women. I 'm a wife and mother first of all. My husband and my children are my dearest treasures." She went on to speak of her home life. Her personality

impressed him more and more favorably and he saw that here at last was one home-loving singer.

Finally he said, "I—I 've thought for years that people of your profession—pray do not be offended, Madame. I 'm just saying it for enlightenment—I 've thought that most of them were abandoned creatures. You 're the first good singer I ever met."

"Mr. Rossi, in my calling as in all others, there are some bad people—the trouble is that we are emotional, and some let their hearts run away with their heads. But with right influence, I believe that to be a singer is the happiest fate in the world. I find new joy in my work every day of my life."

"Mother are n't you going to let me talk to Mr. Rossi at all?" asked Frieda coming up to them.

"Why, certainly, dear. I want a visit with Hilda anyway," and Madame Von Arnim withdrew to the couch.

"Oh, Mr. Rossi, there are so many questions I want to ask you. Let 's sit over here by the window please?"

"I 'll light up first."

"Don't let 's have lights. It 's cosier without."

"But perhaps your mother would rather have them."

"Mother," called Frieda, "you don't care for lights, do you?"

"No, indeed."

"Madame Von Arnim," exclaimed Hilda, "I 'll never forget how good you were to me the night of the concert. I 've often told Silvio about your singing for me."

"Have you forgotten the song I taught you, Hilda?"

"Ah, no, Madame. I 've sung it many times for Silvio!"

"I 'd like to hear you sing it for me now, liebbling."

Hilda hesitated.

"Mr. Rossi would n't like it," she faltered.

"Why not?"

Silvio sank down on the couch on the other side of Madame Von Arnim.

"My father is bitter, Madame, because my mother left us when I was a baby.

Leonora says that before she ran away, father used to love music," she confided in low tones.

"Ah!" exclaimed Madame Von Arnim letting his words sink into her mind. She divined that if Rossi would listen to music, it might conquer his bitterness.

"Hilda," she whispered, "go to Mr. Rossi, and tell him that I 've asked you to sing. Put your arms about his neck and beg him to let you. Gain his permission somehow, and after he has said yes, tell him that I ask him as a personal favor to wait here as there is something that I specially wish to see him about. If you do exactly as I say, I 'll sing for you also."

"I 'd do anything to hear you sing again, and I 'll try my best with Mr. Rossi," answered Hilda, rising.

"Tell Frieda I wish to speak to her.

In another moment Frieda was standing beside her mother.

"Frieda," whispered Madame Von Arnim, "Hilda and I are going to have some singing here in the dark. Stand beside Mr. Rossi, but after the very first,

don't talk to him. He may be affected—he might even break down and sob. I pray God that he may. If he does, you keep silent. But if he should start to leave, detain him someway. He must not go.”

Meanwhile Hilda had whispered her request as Madame Von Arnim had directed.

“I ’ll not have any such foolishness,” he muttered impatiently.

“Mr. Rossi, don't say no. You know I ’m going away with you, and Madame Von Arnim and I cannot sing together again, at least not for years. Please, please let us do as she wishes.”

He rose hurriedly. “You can sing, but I ’ll leave the house.”

Hilda clung to his hand. “Then we can't sing, for it would n't be polite to our guests. Madame Von Arnim asked specially to have you stay. She wants to talk to you. Please, please stay and let us sing. It means so very, very much to me. You—you know how badly I feel about Mrs. Mortimer. When I ’m sad about her, it ’ll give me something else to think about.”

Rossi felt as if he were caught in a trap—and Hilda's touching eagerness conquered.

"I need n't listen," he muttered under his breadth, "I 'll hold my hands over my ears."

"It's foolishness," he said to the child, "but—well hurry and get done with it. I 'd not be so weak if I had n't promised to try to make you happy."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you, Mr. Rossi," she answered, showering kisses on his hand. He snatched it away, and sank down in his chair. She looked wistfully at him a moment, but he kept his face persistently turned away. Both awed and happy at his reluctant consent, she rejoined Madame Von Arnim.

"He 'll let us sing, but he does n't like it," she said.

Madame Von Arnim gave a gratified nod.

"Sit down beside me, Hilda, and begin."

Frieda walked softly back to Rossi. He had his hands over his ears, and his attitude was tense with pain.

“Mr. Rossi, I ’ve come back. I love to talk to you.”

He did not stir.

“Mr. Rossi,” she repeated, louder.

Still he did not heed.

“He ’ll not listen” thought Frieda despairingly. She was so perplexed as to how to arouse the man with the bowed head that she had no ears for the fresh, young voice now flooding the room with sweet melody.

Frieda timidly drew closer.

“Mr. Rossi,” she called for the third time.

He neither stirred nor spoke.

In desperation she caught the hand nearest her, and drew it away from his ear.

“He can’t help hearing now,” she thought.

“What do you want?” he demanded angrily.

“You—you were telling me about flip-flaps.”

“Eh?—” He looked at her in bewilderment, and then laughed wildly. “A flip-



flap? Yes, yes. Well we 'll talk. We 'll not listen. We don't want music."

Then he talked so fast that Frieda feared she was not keeping faith with her mother.

"But he can't help hearing some of it anyway," she decided.

She was right. In spite of himself, the beauty of Hilda's singing enveloped and subdued him. His tone grew softer and at last he was silent. Frieda watched him anxiously.

"What will he do next?"

The singing was having its effect. It made Rossi think of his wife with yearning and pity.

"Oh, my God, why did she leave me?" he sobbed to himself.

It was as if a band about his heart were snapping, in one last, desperate effort not to be weak, he started to rise.

Instantly Frieda thrust her hand into his. He would have pushed her aside, but she would not be repelled. She slipped both her arms around his neck.

"Dear Mr. Rossi, don't go. I 'm very, very sorry that you feel badly."

Her sympathy proved the last wedge. With a moan, he sank back in his chair, and the tears streamed down his careworn face.

Frieda felt that her mission was fulfilled. Still she waited beside him.

Then Rossi heard another voice, deeper, richer, fuller; not more marvelous, perhaps, than the child's, but this one sounded the deeps of human experience and reached the innermost recesses of the soul. For the first time in his life Rossi judged his own short-comings as an angel might.

"I 'm to blame. I 'm hard with everybody. Silvio does not love me as I might make him. Hilda, if she were not so loving, would hate me. Mrs. Mortimer would know better than I how to care for her, but I can't give Hilda up. I love her. I love her."

Instinctively Madame Von Arnim had selected the tender melodies that would touch his heart, and in them the beauty, the nobility and the pathos of her wonderful voice were expressed to the full. Never had she put more feeling into her songs, for she was striving to redeem a man from his

own selfishness, and so dedicate Hilda to the art of song.

Frieda's gentle influence again proved helpful. While she said no further word, she leaned close beside Rossi and soothingly stroked his head. With the loving girl ministering to him, the contrite man felt himself not altogether hard and cold.

Intuition told Madame Von Arnim the psychical moment at which to cease.

"Hilda," she whispered, "can't you and Silvio take Frieda to another room? I want to talk to Mr. Rossi alone."

So the three children withdrew.

"Mr. Rossi," said Madame Von Arnim gently.

He sprang to his feet.

"Why did you come here to torment me with your voice. I hate music."

"No, no, Mr. Rossi. I know better. If you did not love music, it would have no power to move you as it does. Music is divine. It takes away the dross, and leaves only the pure gold. You have passed through the fire in the last few moments,

and now you are ready to give up Hilda.”

“Give up Hilda?” he faltered weakly.

“Yes, Mr. Rossi. Hilda is divinely gifted, and it would be going against God’s will to keep her from singing. You are too good a man to wreck her future, and it will be wrecking her future to keep her with you. As an acrobat, she can only divert people. As a singer, she can speak to their souls. You know that this is true. If you love her, you will let her stay with Mrs. Mortimer. Send for her now, and tell her that she can stay.”

“I can’t, I love her too much,” he moaned.

“It ’s because you love her that you will let her go. Oh, Mr. Rossi, believe me singers are not bad. They have a great mission in the world. Hilda, with that voice of hers, with its marvelous purity and sweetness, is bound to be a power for good. You must not deprive the world of that voice. You want to do what is right. You must tear up that contract with her parents. Mrs. Mortimer has a better right to Hilda than you have.

"I might do what you ask, but for one reason," he answered slowly, and added, "If Hilda leaves, Silvio will want to be a musician."

"A musician?"

"Yes, he has a fool notion of scraping away on a violin."

Perhaps if Madame Von Arnim had not been so bent on gaining her point, or if she had realized that Silvio, in his way, was fully as gifted as Hilda, she would have hesitated. As it was, she hurried to the door.

"Silvio," she cried, "Silvio come here."

While waiting for Silvio, Rossi struck a match, and the room was flooded with light. Madame Von Arnim felt that it was symbolic of the future awaiting Hilda. She had no doubt now of a complete victory.

"Silvio," she exclaimed as he entered, "Hilda 's to stay with Mrs. Mortimer."

"Oh I 'm so glad," said the boy, but the tears rose to his eyes.

"I have n't consented for sure," grumbled Rossi. "Her going depends a good deal on you."

“On me, Father?”

“Yes, if you ’ll promise never to play again, I ’ll tear up my contract and Hilda is free to do as she likes.”

Madame Von Arnim was surprised to note the appalled look on Silvio’s face at these words. “But he ’ll not mind long,” she reassured herself.

“I can’t promise that. I can’t do it, Father.”

The hard expression was returning to Rossi’s face. He was repenting of his leniency.

“Then Hilda’s got to stay with us. That ’s my last word on the subject,” he declared firmly.

“Silvio, you must promise,” whispered Madame Von Arnim.

“Is n’t there any other way, Madame?” he moaned.

His evident misery made her hesitate.

“I knew by his face that he was musical,” she thought. “Perhaps I ’m doing him an injustice. I ought to know more about him before I urge him, but Hilda must be a singer.”

“Oh, think of some other way, Madame.”

She laid her hand gently on his shoulder. “I fear it ’s the only way, Silvio.”

So great a lump rose in his throat that he tried to speak once or twice before he succeeded in forcing any word from his pale lips.

“I—I” he finally stammered, hysterically inclined to tears. By a supreme effort, he calmed himself, and added quite firmly, “Hilda must go. I—I ’ll never play again, Father.”

“You are a noble boy, Silvio,” but, if Madame Von Arnim had realized the real situation, instead of praising him, she would have cried to him to retract his promise.

Rossi knew only too well the greatness of the sacrifice, and he felt that the price he was paying was none too large. So he hurried to his desk, and unlocked the drawer where he kept the treasured contract.

“Now Silvio,” he commanded, facing his son, “bring me your violin.”

The boy recoiled from his father.

“Don’t make me give give up, don’t. Please don’t.”

“But you’ve promised never to play again,” interposed Rossi sternly.

“I—I know, but I can’t give up my violin. You did n’t ask that of me.”

Rossi’s piercing eyes dwelt on his son as if he would read him through and through. Silvio met his look unfalteringly. He had given his word, and meant to keep it.

“I ought to break that violin to pieces, but—well keep it. Only Silvio, if I ever catch you playing it, beware.”

Then with his heart almost as hard as it had been before the singing, Rossi called sternly:

“Hilda, come here.”

“She must n’t know what I ’ve promised. It would make her very unhappy and then, too, she might not go,” cried Silvio.

Again his nobility impressed Madame Von Arnim.

“I ’m proud to know a boy like you, Silvio,” she whispered.

"If I say nothing to her, I can surely trust you?" questioned Rossi.

"Father, you know you can. You never knew me to break my word."

As Hilda entered, Rossi tore the paper into shreds.

"Hilda, you 're free to go," he cried bitterly.

"Free, Mr. Rossi?"

"Yes, yes, and you must go to-night. Madame Von Arnim can take you to Mrs. Mortimer. Leonora will pack your things and send them to you to-morrow."

"Oh, Father, can't she stay with us until we sail?" pleaded Silvio.

"No, she either goes to-night or not at all. Good bye, Hilda," and without waiting for a word from her, Rossi rushed out of the house.

Hilda and Silvio were stunned. To part so suddenly was unbearable.

"It 's not your last good bye," consoled Madame Von Arnim. "I 'm sure Mrs. Mortimer will wait in New York awhile. We 'll all be down to the boat to see you off, Silvio. So Hilda, we must be going now."

“Then I ’m really to go to-night?” Hilda faltered.

“Yes, it is best.”

“Oh Silvio,” cried Hilda. “I did n’t know how hard it would be to leave you.”

He could not answer. His despair was too deep for words.

Breaking the news to Leonora was hard, too. Both she and Hilda cried bitterly. Silvio, alone, appeared unmoved. Not once in the short time before Hilda departed did he give the least expression to his feelings.

At the outer door, Hilda looked wistfully back at him.

“It ’s not so bad after all,” she said. “Our dream ’s coming true. I ’m to be a singer, and you ’ll be a wonderful violinist some day. You know you promised.”

He managed to keep control of himself until she was no longer in sight. Then with a heart-breaking moan, he pushed by Leonora who wished to console him, rushed to his own room, and locked himself in.

The first object his eyes fell upon was

the violin that he had given his word never to play.

That unnerved him completely.

“What would Hilda do if she knew?” he sobbed, but he would have made the sacrifice over again for her.

CHAPTER XX

THE BROKEN VIOLIN



ON the day he was to sail, Silvio wakened very early.

"I can never play again," was his first thought, and there seemed little left in life.

At the breakfast table, Rossi said he was going out to attend to a few last errands.

"They 're to come for the trunks at ten, so be sure to have them ready," he cautioned before leaving.

Silvio went to his room. Everything of his was packed except the violin. That he purposely had left until the last.

"If it would n't make father angry I 'd carry it by hand," he thought, taking it up and eyeing it lovingly. Merely to touch it comforted him.

He closed the lid of his trunk, and sat down on the edge of it. His violin and bow were in his hands now.

“I ’ll not play,” he assured himself. “What will Grandfather say when he knows what I ’ve promised?”

Pictures of long gone scenes of his life in Florence crowded upon his mind. He saw himself again a little violin-playing boy. His eyes grew dreamy, and beautiful sounds demanding expression, haunted him. He drew his bow half-way across the strings; then conscience revived in him for a moment.

“I must n’t play,” he warned himself, but he still clung to the instrument.

Presently the sounds grew more clearly defined. Everything but the love of music fled from Silvio’s mind. Without any intention of breaking his word; without knowledge that he was doing so, he began to play, entirely possessed by his passion.

The first notes were so soft that they did not startle him from his reverie, and when they swelled out in full volume, he did not waken to what he was doing.

Leonora, busy with her packing in the rear of the apartment, was startled by the music, but she had no thought of stopping him.

“Even if Father does n’t want him to play, it will do Silvio good,” she said to herself. “He loves music, and he plays beautifully. I wish Father ’d let him be a musician. I ’m getting tired of the stage. I ’d like to settle down and keep house for Silvio and Father. Would n’t it be lovely to have a home of our very own,” and Leonora sighed.

New melodies kept floating though Silvio’s head. He played on and on, perfectly oblivious to everything but music. Neither he nor Leonora heard the outside door open.

“Silvio!”

With a guilty start, Silvio looked up and beheld his father standing in the doorway.

“You ’ve broken your word,” thundered Rossi.

“I—I forgot.”

His faltering, penitent voice only infuriated Rossi the more. He swooped down on Silvio; snatched the violin, and before the boy divined his intention, swung it above his head. The next instant he struck it violently against the far end of the trunk,

and the delicate wood shivered into many pieces.

"What have you done?" screamed Silvio springing to his feet. His eyes glared like the eyes of one crazed. "Oh, my violin 's broken," he sobbed pressing his hands against his throbbing temples.

"I 'll teach you not to break your word to me."

Silvio stooped and gathered up some of the fragments.

"You might better have killed me, Father," he moaned. "I wish I were dead."

His grief calmed Rossi, and made him a little penitent.

"You should n't have broken your word, but I 'd not have done it if I had known you cared that much."

"I wish I were dead. I wish I were dead," Silvio sobbed, rushing past his father and out of the room.

Rossi's first impulse was to follow.

"But no, I must n't be too weak with him," he thought. "I 'll make it up to him when he 's calmer."

Their voices had brought Leonora into the hall.

“Silvio, what ’s the matter?” she cried. The strange look on his face frightened her.

He laughed wildly and held out some of the splintered wood.

“Here ’s all that ’s left of my violin. I wish I were dead,” he sobbed.

“Oh, Silvio,” she exclaimed starting toward him with open arms.

“Don’t,” he cried. “I can’t bear it,” and to escape her sympathy, he rushed through the outer door, and downstairs into the street.

“I ’ll never go back. I ’ll never go back,” he moaned.

Leonora waited irresolutely in the open doorway. As she stood thus, Rossi came into the hall.

“Father, you ’ve driven Silvio away,” she cried accusingly. “I ’m afraid he ’ll never come back.”

Her words stabbed his conscience afresh, but he would not let Leonora know.

“Never fear, he ’ll come back all right,” and he strode into the front room.

He threw himself down in a chair beside his desk, intending to sort out a few last papers, but he was too disturbed even for this.

“He may not come back,” he thought with a sob, and sank his head in his hands on the desk.

Leonora decided to rush after her brother, but when she reached the street, she saw that she was too late. Already Silvio was out of sight.

At this moment a carriage drew up beside the curb. “It ’s Hilda,” said Leonora to herself. “Perhaps she saw Silvio. If she did we can drive after him and bring him back.”

“Hilda,” she cried as the girl was stepping from the carriage, “have you seen anything of Silvio?”

Hilda with her arms full of bundles sprang down beside her.

“No, is n’t he here? I ’m disappointed. I have a surprise for him.”

“I wish I knew which way he ’s gone,”



thought Leonora anxiously, "but no doubt Father 's right. He 'll come back soon. I 'll not tell Hilda. There 's no use of worrying her."

"Why, Hilda," she said, trying to appear cheerful, "we did n't expect to see you before we went to the boat."

"I could n't wait. But come, I 've something to show you."

Leonora led her upstairs and out to the dining room. Hilda placed her package on the table.

"Leonora," she cried joyously, "what would you like best of anything—something to wear I mean?"

But Leonora was paying no attention. Hilda, however, did not mind. She eagerly unwrapped the largest package.

"Shut your eyes, Leonora," she commanded. Then she drew from the paper a shimmering red silk gown.

"Now open your eyes, Leonora. Is n't it beautiful?"

"Yes indeed, but what are you doing with it here?"

"I heard you say once that you 'd give anything for a red silk dress."

"But it 's not for me!"

"Yes it is. When I was with your father, I sent Mrs. Mortimer most of the money I made. Well she had n't spent a cent of it, and she 's given it back to me. So I bought presents for all of you."

"I—I don't know how to thank you, Hilda," began Leonora. Ordinarily, she would have been voluble enough in the expression of her delight, but now she was still anxious about Silvio.

"Don't thank me. Where 's your father?"

"In the sitting room."

Hilda picked up a package, and ran to the front room. Rossi did not turn as she entered. Hilda began to feel timid, but love had brought her to him, and she would not turn back.

"Mr. Rossi," she said softly.

He did not hear her, but as she came toward him, he turned suddenly.

"I thought it might be Silvio," he exclaimed.

Hilda slipped one arm about his neck. "I 've brought you a present, dear Mr. Rossi. It 's just a little way of thanking you for all you did for me."

She held out the package, but he turned from her with a sob.

"You—you 're not angry at me still, are you, Mr. Rossi?"

"No, Hilda."

"What 's the matter then, dear Mr. Rossi?"

"Don't ask me," he cried savagely. Then to atone, he added, "You 're a thoughtful girl to bring me a present. What is it?"

"It 's just a locket with my picture. I hoped you 'd like that. I have a gold watch for Silvio. Do you think he 'll be pleased.

"I—I hope so." In Rossi's ears rang the words, "You might better have killed me, father. I wish I were dead."

"Don't you think he 'll like a watch? If you don't, I might change it for something else."

Rossi laughed bitterly. "Change it for a violin. That 's the only thing he 'd like."

"A violin? But Silvio has a lovely violin."

"No he has n't. I broke it."

"Oh, Mr. Rossi!"

"You need n't look so horrified. It 's partly your fault," he added brutally. "He promised if I'd let you go, he 'd never play again, and—"

"Silvio promised that! Oh, Mr. Rossi, he should n't have done that! I—"

"I wish to God, I 'd never demanded it of him," he cried springing to his feet. "He 's gone and may never come back. He should n't have played, though. It drove me crazy. I snatched his violin and broke it. The look that came into his eyes haunts me. Silvio, come back, I 'm sorry!" he cried, sinking into his chair again.

Hilda felt utterly helpless. She knew even better than he what the loss of the violin would mean to Silvio.

"If only I had money. I 'd get him a new violin," she thought. "Oh why did I spend all my money? It would take a great deal to buy another such as he had, I know,

and perhaps Mr. Rossi would n't let him play anyway."

"Mr. Rossi," she said in timid pleading, "if Silvio does come back, you 'll be kind to him, won't you?"

"You think me a brute, too, Hilda? I—"

"Mr. Rossi!" she interrupted, pressing her cheek close to his, "indeed I don't. It—it 's only about music that you 're hard, and Silvio loves music as much as I do. We can't help it. It was born in us, and it has to come out. Silvio did n't mean to displease you, I know. He loves you, and —"

"Do you really think that, Hilda?"

"Yes, only if you 'd be kind to him about his playing, he 'd be fonder of you."

"But then he 'd want to leave me."

"I don't believe it—not if you took an interest in his music. Why Mr. Rossi, you ought to be proud of Silvio, and encourage him to play. Oh. please let him play! You will, won't you?"

"I—I 'll see when he comes back."

"Thank you so much, Mr. Rossi," she

exclaimed, as if the matter were already settled. Then she hurried back to Leonora.

“Leonora,” she cried, your father has told me about Silvio. When he comes back, tell him not to feel too badly. I ’m going to do all I can for him.”

She picked up the package she had brought for Silvio. Then she hesitated

“I’ll not tell Leonora. If I fail, she ’d be disappointed.”

So she simply kissed her saying, “I ’ll give Silvio his present at the boat. We ’ll be there early,” and in another moment she was gone.

A little later she rushed wildly into the hotel room where Mrs. Mortimer was waiting for her.

“Oh Mrs. Mortimer,” she sobbed, “I must have some more money. If you ’ll only let me have it, you ’ll never be sorry. I ’ll work day and night to earn it back for you, and I ’ll make it up to you if it takes me all the rest of my life.”

CHAPTER XXI

“ALL ASHORE!”



AILING hour was drawing dangerously near, but still Silvio had not returned. Rossi would have been in despair but for a new hope that suddenly came to him.

“Silvio may have gone to the boat. I ’m going to see,” he cried excitedly to Leonora. “You ’ll have to stay here. We must n’t take the least chance of missing him. If he should come while I ’m gone, drive immediately to the wharf. The carriage is waiting out in front for you now. But if I should find him, I ’ll telephone to you. Of course if we both fail, we ’ll not sail. I ’ll not leave this country until my boy is found.”

Rossi hurried away on his quest.

Disappointment awaited him at his journey’s end. Silvio was nowhere in sight.

But to make sure that his son had not come, Rossi went aboard the boat, and on up to his rooms.

A moment afterward Leonora's carriage came dashing up. She sprang out and Silvio followed close after her.

"Father 'll be so happy to see you," she whispered as they hurried along the pier. "If you had n't come, it would have been an awful blow to him."

"I—would not have come if it had n't been for you," muttered Silvio. He feared that he never could feel the same toward his father.

"I don't want to go inside," he said when they reached the deck. "You can tell father."

Soon he beheld Hilda with something bulky under her arm hurrying up the gang plank. Behind her were Mrs. Mortimer, Madame Von Arnim, and Frieda.

"There's Silvio," cried Hilda. She stopped a second and handed the package to Frieda, then flew onward to join Silvio.

"Were late, but we could n't help it,"

she gasped, and, though she saw how unhappy he looked, she smiled.

"Silvio, everything is coming out all right," she whispered.

"She 's going to say something now about my being a violinist. I wish she would n't talk that way. I can't bear it," he thought, and turned his face from her.

"Where are your father and sister?" demanded Hilda.

"They 're inside. There they come now."

Rossi's joy was unmistakable, and he showed it not only in his face but by his actions.

"My boy, my boy," he cried, running to him with open arms, and embracing him in the impulsive Italian fashion. "I never was more frightened. I was afraid you had run away forever."

"I—I did mean to," stammered Silvio. "Then I just could n't."

"You do love me then, my boy? That brought you back to me, did n't it?"

Silvio scowled. "I—I can't lie to you,

Father. I came back on account of Leonora."

"Well, I thank God anyway," Rossi cried fervently. "Now that you 've come, Silvio, I 'll do anything to make you happy."

Silvio had no answering word, but Hilda smiled at Rossi, and her face was radiantly happy.

"You mean that, don't you, Mr. Rossi?"

"Mean what, Hilda?"

"That you 'll do anything to make him happy. I know you mean it. I trust you."

She held a small package out to Silvio.

"I hope you 'll like this gift, Silvio. I bought it with some of the money I made while I was with you."

Silvio opened the package, but his face expressed little pleasure.

"It 's a beautiful watch, Hilda," he said, not to appear ungrateful.

"You'd rather have it than anything else, would n't you, Silvio?"

His gaze faltered before hers. He could no longer keep the tears back.

"Silvio, it 's all right. Everything is all

right," she cried, and then she turned and seized the parcel Frieda held.

"We 've brought you what you want most in all the world, Silvio."

The shape of the parcel revealed to him what the present was.

"It 's a violin," he cried, his eyes once more alight.

"Yes, Silvio. Mrs. Mortimer gave me the money for it, and Madame Von Arnim helped us find it."

"I can't thank you, Hilda. I never expected to be happy again, but now—" Suddenly a new fear assailed him. "Father, may I keep it?"

"Yes, my boy. I meant to buy you a violin myself."

Silvio felt that heaven had come to earth for him. He could hardly wait to try his new instrument.

Madame Von Arnim divined his impatience. She knew too that if the ice were broken while Rossi was in a softened mood, Silvio's playing would be less of a trial to him in the future.

"Let 's go to your stateroom. I must

have the pleasure of hearing Silvio before you sail."

So they hurried to Rossi's room, which was one of the large ones on deck. There was plenty of space for them all to be seated. Silvio stood in the doorway.

He drew his precious gift from its case, and eyed it reverently, but also anxiously. He was almost afraid to draw the first note.

"Supposing it 's not a good violin," he thought.

"What 's the matter, Silvio? Why don't you begin?" asked Frieda.

"I—I've got to see if it 's keyed right," he faltered.

Then softly he tuned it. This preliminary work made him somewhat less anxious. Still the moment was a critical one. He raised his bow breathlessly, and with a long, eager stroke drew it across the strings.

"Ah!" he exclaimed rapturously, and his face was again glorified.

"It 's tone is perfect—richer even than my violin. I never can thank you," he added looking from Mrs. Mortimer to Hilda.

“Don’t try, Silvio. Just play for us,” Mrs. Mortimer answered.

Back to his mind floated the tune that had made him break his promise in the morning. Without another word he began playing it. His new violin so inspired him that every one of his little audience realized to some extent the genius of the boy.

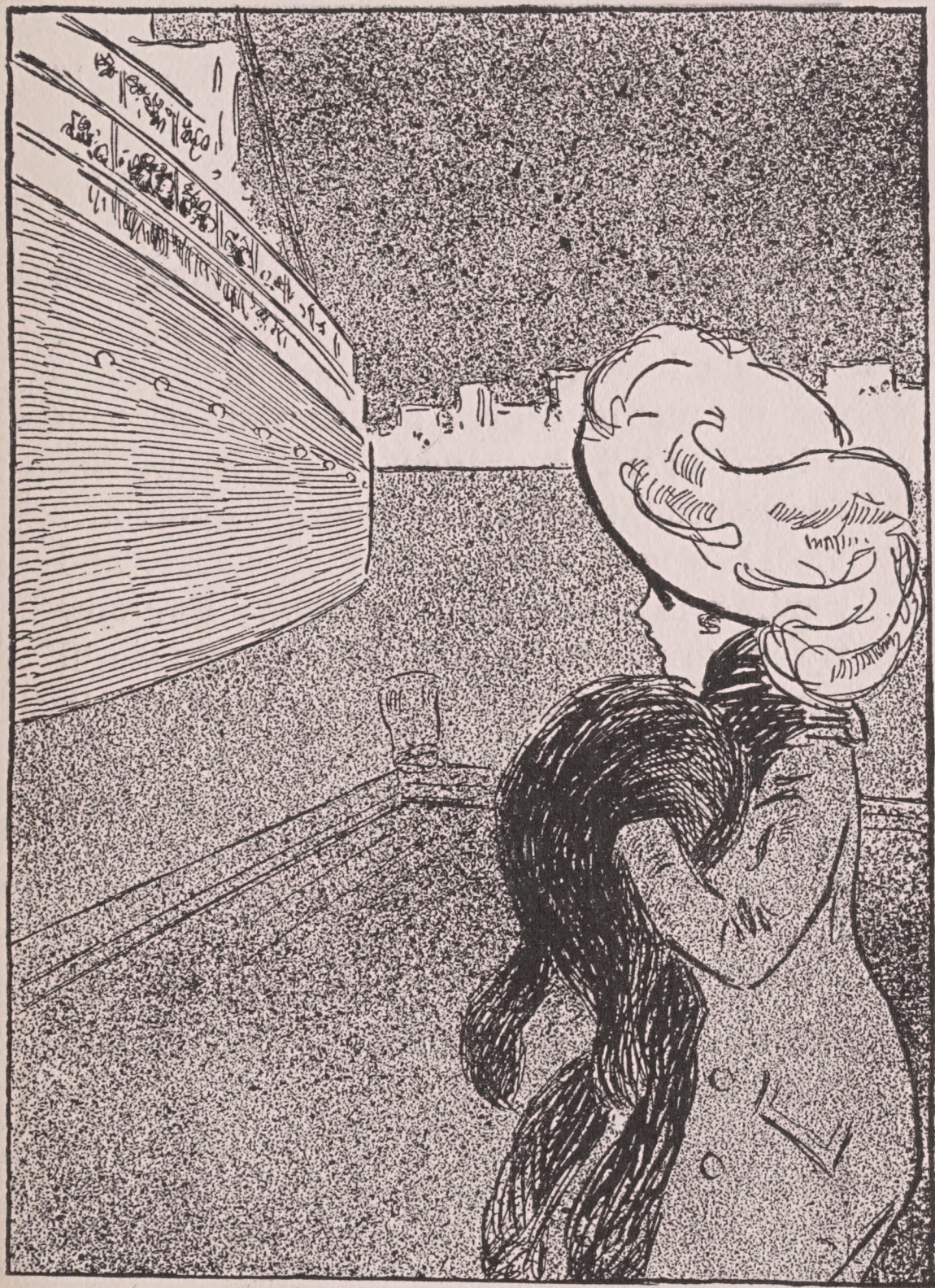
“Silvio,” Hilda exclaimed almost before the last note, “I never heard you play that before. Is it something new?”

“Yes, it only came to me this morning.”

“Came to you this morning?” interrupted Madame Von Arnim. “What do you mean?”

“I—I—why it just came into my head, that ’s all.”

“You don’t mean you composed it?” cried Madame Von Arnim springing to her feet. “I can’t believe it. It ’s wonderful, wonderful. Mr. Rossi, you may well be proud of your boy. He ’ll yet make the name of Rossi famous all over the world. Silvio has a great future. Mark my words, Mr. Rossi, and do everything in your power



to foster the genius of your boy. He could make a fortune now by playing."

"We already have a fortune, Madame. I—"

"All ashore," come the call along the deck.

Hilda joined Silvio.

"We met on a boat, and now we part on a boat. Is n't it strange?" she said. Before he could speak, she answered herself.

"It 's very strange, but it 's nice, and parting is better than meeting. For now we 've grown to be good friends, and we 'll never forget each other. And best of all, you 're to be a violinist some day."

He smiled back at her now. "It does seem as if our dream were coming true, does n't it, Hilda?" Then he threw up his cap.

"Hurrah for the girl who climbed the mast. If it had n't been for that, we would never have met."

As Hilda slipped her hand into Mrs. Mortimer's, she was well content that she was no longer "Hilda of the Hippodrome."

Once more came the cry, "All ashore!"

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